

Yusura Kankitsu

Illustrator
Ruria Miyuki

vol. **4.5**

Reincarnated Mage with Inferior Eyes

Breezing through the Future as an Oppressed Ex-Hero



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Ayane

An Obsidian Eye mage who's part of the magecraft organization, Chaos Raid.

Daytona

The daughter of the president of the royal capital's merchant's association. She met Abel in a tome store. She later becomes the Hero of Water.

Maria

For a time, she lived with Abel at an orphanage. She later becomes the Hero of Fire.

Cain

He met Abel in Arosa, the Town of the Reanimated Dead. He later becomes the Hero of Ash.

Abel

A genius mage with **Amber Eyes**—the strongest you can have. He was orphaned at a young age after being abandoned by his mother.



It was raining fish.
All that was left was
to pick out the most
expensive fish and
return the rest to the
ocean. If I could keep
this up, I'd have a
very efficient method
of catching fish on
my hands.

“Wh-What
is this?!”

“Wow!
This is
seriously
amazing, Abel!
How'd you do
that?!”



*What a strange feeling.
My body feels hot to its core.
Suddenly, I felt a strange
sensation deep in my eyes.
What is this?*

**“Free her,
or I promise
I’ll kill you.”**

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Chapter 1: A Certain Mage's Reminiscence (The Hero of Fire Arc)

"Get out, you monster!"

Like a stray cat, I was thrown from the house, landing in a thin layer of snow. The dirt beneath the snow covered me.

"Mom, why are you—"

"Don't you *dare* call me that! You're no child of mine! You're my dead sister's son!"

Her words echoed within me endlessly. Being only five years old, I couldn't comprehend what she was saying. All I could do was lie there on the ground, staring at the woman I'd loved as my mother.

"Why are you looking at me with those rebellious eyes?! You have something you want to say?!" she screeched as she threw something at me.

It was a flower vase. I needed to avoid it, or I'd be hurt, but I didn't. Instead, I manipulated the space in front of me, freezing the vase in midair. As soon as I tried to open my mouth, the woman began screeching again.

"You wretched monster! You don't even use incantations or mediums to cast magecraft—you're just like a demon!"

Her opinion was a foolish one, although not unexpected for a country bumpkin like her. In fact, any living creature could use their own body as a medium to produce magecraft, so long as they had enough mana.

However, this was a settlement of humans, and a small one at that. Barely any news from the outside world reached this place—they were essentially closed off from the world. I understood now that whenever these villagers saw someone who possessed powers that were clearly different from themselves, they would perceive these individuals as fully different beings altogether.

"De...mon." My voice quivered as I tried to say the word in its entirety.

“That’s right! Go to the territory of the demons, or wherever! Never, *ever* come back here!” she roared, before slamming the door shut.

I heard the sound of the door locking, and then quiet settled over me, just like the falling snow. I slowly stood up, but, having no clue where to go, I simply tottered aimlessly down the dark road. Day and night, I continued walking through the frigid cold.

I stole food, and was almost killed for it. I slept in ditches. Once, I’d heard that cats and dogs hide when they’re about to die—maybe that’s what I was doing. I’d grown so thin that I’d literally become skin and bones. Eventually, I found myself running down a brick alley in an unfamiliar town. I came to a stop, leaning against the wall to stare up at the sky and the unending snowfall. Then, I closed my eyes.

“Kid, *this* is where you’re gonna die?” a husky voice called out to me.

I opened my heavy eyelids, and saw a grizzled man standing there. He chuckled lightly as he looked down at me.

I tried to squeeze out a word—any word, but couldn’t. My throat was too parched. I could only taste dried blood. Even so, the man smiled and reached his hand out to me.

“Got a name, kid?”

I was beginning to think him cruel, for asking questions despite the fact that he could tell I could barely speak. Trembling, I reached out and took his hand.

“A...Abel.”

As I was on the verge of fainting, he looked at me and gripped my hand. “Abel, huh? Listen up. From now on, you’re my son.”

That was the moment that light filled my world, which had once been closed off.



Two years had passed since that day, but I could still remember all of it vividly. As I lay there on the precipice of death, I’d been taken in by a guy who’d just coincidentally been passing by. His name was Garius, and he was a man of

around forty years who ran an orphanage on the outskirts of the royal capital. And thanks to what happened that day, I ended up living there.

“I should’ve known you’d be here, Abel...”

Garius was not only my savior, but also my magecraft instructor and father. I’d heard rumors that he used to be a big-shot mage in the royal capital. He was very knowledgeable about Amber-Eyed individuals, and because I had nowhere else to go, he’d taken me in and taught me all sorts of things.

“Talking to others kinda brings me down, so I’d rather be here, reading by myself. It’s much more enjoyable.”

There was a small space behind the stairs that I liked. It was one of the few places where I could really relax. Reading the books that he lent me in this space was one of my secret pleasures.

“Sheesh... Who might you take after, I wonder? If this is what you’re like as a child, I’m worried about your future.”

My future? You don’t have to lie. There was no way he wasn’t aware of how the war with the demons had intensified. The hatred towards those with Amber Eyes, like myself, grew stronger with each passing day. Even in this orphanage, I was relatively alone. I didn’t really have anyone that I could call a friend.

“I heard that you tried to threaten the other kids with your magecraft, Abel.”

“No, they started—”

“It’s impressive how well you deal with how you’re treated as someone with Amber Eyes...but I can’t really say I approve of how you handle it sometimes,” he said, ruffling my hair.

Those with Amber Eyes were viewed as symbols of fear and targets of persecution. Though there were people who only felt afraid of us, there were also people who turned the anger that they should have directed at demons on those with Amber Eyes instead.

The kids who’d gotten into a fight with me were just like those people. Their parents had been killed by demons, so they hated those with Amber Eyes indiscriminately.

“Listen, Abel. You have an amazing talent for magecraft. But you shouldn’t ever use it for yourself. Only use it for the sake of others.”

“Others...?”

“Right. If you do, nobody will be scared of you anymore. You can hold your head high and live your life proudly.”

I fell silent. I knew that these were just platitudes, but his words differed from what other adults said. He was so just and idealistic to the point of being naive, and treated everyone with warmth.

“Okay then. Let’s start today’s class, shall we? We’ll pick up from where we left off yesterday—reviewing the basics of Imbuement Magecraft.”

That was why, as we sat before the fireplace, with the sound of crackling wood filling the room, I listened so intently to his lecture.



I met *her* at the age of eight. I’d become very used to my life at the orphanage, and had become able to use magecraft at a high level. Usually, it’d take around ten years of training for people with Amber Eyes to master magecraft, but it seemed that it really depended on the person. At the very least, I was different. Perhaps partially due to the fact that I’d been blessed with a great learning environment, it hadn’t even taken me three years to be able to effortlessly use all the different types of magecraft.

“Give it back! Come on!”

“Shaddup! You’re a guy—why’re you playin’ with a doll?!”

“We’ll hold it for ya! If you want it back, come and take it!”

Curious about the loud voices, I looked into the room. *Hm. A shy-looking boy seems to be surrounded by a group of guys.* This wasn’t exactly a rare sight. No matter how old they were, there would be strife among humans.

According to Garius, when humans live together in a closed environment, a caste system will inevitably form, leading to fights. That being said, I refused to get involved, so this had nothing to do with me. With that in mind, I turned on my heel and began to leave.

“Hey! You should all be ashamed!” a girl barked.

Her hair was crimson like fire, and she sounded very strong-willed. She seemed to be around two years younger than me. *Who is she? I haven't seen her around here before.* The way things worked around here was that kids “graduated” once they were taken in by foster parents. Thanks to that, there were different faces passing through all the time.

For the record, it went without saying that nobody wanted a wretched Amber-Eyed boy like myself. Before I realized it, I'd become the kid who'd been at the orphanage the longest.

“Ganging up on someone weak is a disgrace for guys!”

“Yeah? And who are *you*?”

“I'm Maria! I'm the proud daughter of a knight, with justice in my heart!” she said, pulling out what looked like a toy sword.

Hm. If she was a little more reserved, she'd be a beauty, but that all goes to waste when she opens her mouth. She's definitely the self-centered type...and I mean that to the extreme.

“Hey, newbie. How about we teach you how things work around here?”

“Huh?”

In the next moment, one of the guys landed a sharp kick to Maria's abdomen. I couldn't help but sigh. Watching events progress in this fashion was never fun. Some might've just written this off as nothing more than a squabble between kids, but in my opinion, it should've been taken more seriously. It was precisely because they were children that they could be excessively cruel and violent.

“How do you like *that*?! Hey, where'd all that gusto go?!”

“Guh!” Maria's face twisted in agony as she took kick after kick.

“Listen up—whoever's strongest is king around these parts! Oh, I know. Hey, newbie, you're gonna be my new doll from now on!” said the guy who was most likely the leader, pulling Maria by the hair.

Before I knew it, the other guys had surrounded her, cutting off any chance of escape. Given that the orphanage was a place filled with hotblooded kids who

had lost their parents, it seemed it would be impossible for her to live here peacefully after this.

But of course, whatever they wanted to do had nothing to do with me. I knew that the right choice was to ignore what was going on. But suddenly, Garius's words popped into my head. *Using my strength for others...was it?*

I guess I don't have a choice. I didn't care *that* much about what happened to this girl, but it would've left a bad taste in my mouth if I just stepped away and left her for dead. Anyway, this was a good chance to test out how effective the magecraft I'd learned was against humans.

"Wind Bullet."

I compressed air into bullets and shot them through the gap in the door. As the bullets' trajectories were so straightforward, the risk that the kids would be able to tell where they'd come from was high, so I made sure to control each bullet to alter its flight path.

"Gyah!"

"Oof!"

"Wah!"

My bullets knocked each of them flat on their butts. Then, the room went dark, as if it'd been doused in ink.

"Wh-What's going on?! Why's it dark?!"

Of course, this wasn't an accident. It was all part of the plan. I'd made one of the bullets I'd fired extinguish the fire, but at a delay. I wasn't going to let this opening I'd made go to waste.

"Demon. There's a demon here," I yelled from outside the room, trying to frighten them.

I know you're your own worst critic, but I definitely could've said those words a little less monotonously. Still, though, that seemed to do the trick.

"No!!!"

"Mommy!"

Good grief. Despite harboring so much hate towards demons, and even acting on it whenever they saw me, when a situation where they might actually face a demon presented itself, they turned tail and started quivering in their boots. Pathetic. Of course, if someone had only cast Flashlight, they could've immediately seen through my lie.

But, due to the perceived emergency of the situation, they were all panicked and couldn't properly compose their magecraft. As a result, they scattered, fleeing the room like spiderlings. When I used magecraft to light the room once more, Maria approached me.

"Who...are you?"

Hm. Compared to those other guys, she seems to actually have some courage. Usually, seeing someone with Amber Eyes would frighten people, but not her. She looked straight into my eyes without even flinching.

"If you wanna live a long life, you should learn from this and never do anything so dangerous again." I purposely neglected to answer her question. If she became involved with me, that'd only spell further disaster for her. "Heal."

After treating her wounds, I quickly turned on my heel and left the room. This was how I, by sheer chance, met Maria, the Hero of Fire, and one of the Distinguished Four whose name was passed down through history.





Well, six months had passed since I'd saved the girl with crimson hair, Maria, on a whim. Contrary to my prediction, life at the orphanage had continued to be peaceful since then.

"I got you now, Abel!"

Sensing someone coming from behind, I instantly fortified the newspaper I was holding and blocked the blow.

"Aw, what? *How?*! You shouldn't be able to block my sword with paper!" Maria was in utter shock that I'd blocked her all-out attack with a piece of the newspaper I'd been holding.

If you're wondering why Maria was trying to launch surprise attacks on me, it's because I'd said that if she could even land one blow on me, I'd take her on as my student, and she'd taken me in complete seriousness.

Of course, that hadn't been my first choice. I'd refused her initially, but then she wouldn't stop pestering me. She was so persistent about it that I had no choice but to make that verbal promise.

"You rigged this paper somehow, didn't you?! Let me see!" Maria took the newspaper and inspected it suspiciously. "Hm... It doesn't look like there's anything unusual about it..."

Though Maria showed glimpses of having an above-average talent for magecraft, she seemed completely inexperienced with Obsidian Eye Magecraft. I could almost see a huge question mark appear over her head as she examined the newspaper. She couldn't tell at all that I'd used Imbuement Magecraft.

"Hey, Abel, did you see this article?" she asked, her gaze suddenly coming to a stop partway down the page.

As a child who'd been raised in a knight's household, she was one of the few children here who could read.

"You're talking about the Human Transmutation Magecraft incidents, right? I hear another person was abducted yesterday."

Human Transmutation was in vogue right now, and that trend had recently

reached its peak. Various mages had begun researching how to produce a human soul. The cause of this craze was the ongoing war with the demons, as the human forces were beginning to dwindle.

In order to compensate for the lack of manpower, the government had announced that they'd give an extremely hefty reward to whoever could create a practical Human Transmutation Magecraft. Thus, of course, research into the subject had gained traction.

"You should be careful when you go out. It's been dangerous recently."

There were many mages who thought of humans as a crucial ingredient in the development of magecraft. Of all humans, though, children were prized most highly, as their souls were the purest, despite their bodies being weaker. Accordingly, children went for very high prices.

"I don't need to worry about the outside world! After all, I'm gonna be here with you forever, Abel!" she said, flashing me a smile without a care in the world.



Good grief. This girl is so carefree. Most likely, though, the time we'd spend together would be a lot shorter than she thought. After all, unlike me, she was blessed not only with talent but also with looks. It was only a matter of time before she was adopted.



In the distance, if I listened closely, I could hear the critters of the evening chirping softly.

"Hey, Abel, why do you reject her?"

On a certain night, Garius asked me this baffling question as I helped with his research. I saw him as my magecraft instructor, but it'd been a long time since he'd been in a position to teach me anything. As time passed, I'd accumulated knowledge and techniques by myself, and had even become good enough to help him with his research.

"By 'her,' do you mean Maria?"

"Yeah. It's rare for you to get involved with other kids, so I've been observing you two with great interest."

I see. I was thinking it's strange that someone as excellent as Maria hasn't been adopted yet, but now I can guess why that might be the case. My guess was that Garius had put off opportunities to introduce Maria to prospective adoptive parents so that he could continue to observe my behavior around her.

"I think...it's because I'm scared. If I open my heart, I have a feeling that I'll be betrayed."

Suddenly, images flashed through my head of the woman I used to call my mother.

"Get out, you monster!" she'd said.

It was possible that Maria wasn't scared of me yet because she was still young and innocent. But as she grew older, it was likely her values would change, and she could become a completely different person. That's why I'd naturally put a wall between myself and Maria...and between myself and other people as well.

"Heh heh. That right? I'm kinda relieved to know that you have the same

kinda worries as most people.” He laughed, ruffling my hair. “Don’t worry. You’re my son. As long as you’re here, I’ll make sure you never feel uncomfortable.”

I always liked seeing the deep wrinkles that’d form when he laughed. His hands were the same ones that I’d known all this time—they were warmer than anybody’s. I began to get the feeling that everything would work out. I hoped that the days would continue to pass forever, just like this.

But, one day, the peaceful life that I thought I had would crumble to dust.



On a day when it was storming so hard that it threatened to tear the very roof off, there was a pounding at the door. I was in the library reading when I heard this furious knocking.

“Abel!” A girl burst into the room, completely drenched, and leaped into my arms.

Uh...hello? Could you not do that when you’re soaking wet? I quickly moved the hand holding the book behind my back to protect it, and hugged her reluctantly with the other.

“What should I do...? I’m graduating tomorrow,” Maria said, her face wet both from her tears and the rain.

I see. Sure, I’d known this day was coming, but it had arrived sooner than I’d expected. I might have sounded like a broken record, but this orphanage was a temporary housing facility for children who’d lost their relatives. A child like Maria, who had so many attractive traits, was never going to be stuck here forever. *It took a while, but I guess Garius has finally decided to introduce her to people who might want to adopt her.*

“It’ll be fine. This was bound to happen the minute you stepped foot in here.”

“I don’t want to... I don’t want to leave...”

Good grief. The way she was holding on to me suggested that she wasn’t going to budge until she was satisfied with my response. *I don’t have a choice. I need to cheer her up.* Later, I’d think back to this moment, and how the whim

I'd acted on here might have changed the future drastically.

"Take this as a parting gift."

I brought out a scrap of paper from a notepad that I'd pulled from a drawer. However, this was no ordinary scrap of paper—I'd done something special to it.

"Huh? Is this...?" Surprise filled her face as she accepted it from me.

For a while now, I'd had nothing but time on my hands. One of the things I'd studied was something called "origami." I'd gotten pretty good at it, to the point where I considered myself an expert.

"It's like a good luck charm that'll protect you. Let it remind you of me, and take good care of it."

At the very least, she seemed rather pleased by my words. After that, she made me promise over and over again that we'd reunite someday before finally leaving the room.

I glanced out the window, and saw the thin trees shaking in the strong wind. *Doesn't look like the weather will get better anytime soon.*



Now then... It was the middle of the night, and everyone was asleep. Fallen branches, knocked from the trees by the incessant rain, stood like bridges over water as it pooled on the ground. A feeble mana signal guided my steps. It was unfortunate that the storm showed no signs of clearing up, but there was something I absolutely needed to confirm. No... Somewhere deep in my heart, I'd known the truth all along. However, I'd unconsciously sealed it away, suppressing it.

When I arrived at my destination, I came to a stop, feeling something very out of place beneath my feet. I walked over the muddy ground, and found an iron plate jutting out of the earth. I pulled it up. Beneath it were stairs that led downwards, deep into the ground. I steeled myself and took step after step into the darkness, until...

"Abel... What brings you here?"

It seemed that by the time I'd taken a single step into this place, he'd already

sensed me. There was Garius, looking down at me with a weirdly satisfied smile across his face.

“I put a tracking magecraft on the origami I gave Maria yesterday. But I knew for a while that there was a place like this around here.”

All around Garius were various empty humans who’d had their souls ripped out of them. *Good grief. I know all of these kids... They’re the ones who supposedly “graduated.”*

“Why are you doing this?” I asked.

There was no mistaking it. He was researching Human Transmutation Magecraft in this underground facility. Though there were reports of this kind of work having become more common, there was nothing out there on this scale. This was unprecedented.

“Sacrifice is necessary for the advancement of magecraft. I’m sure you, of all people, understand what I mean... Don’t you, Abel?”

There was a certain record about Garius I’d read in secret. It said that he was a remarkable mage. His talent had been recognized at a young age, and he’d been appointed as a mage at the royal court. During his tenure, he left behind many an accomplishment.

However, as a commoner who’d assumed a post of power, he earned the ire of others. Those in power in this country were rotten—they stole his achievements and dragged his name through the mud, eventually driving him out into this remote area.

“You’re right. After all, I’ve been watching you closer than anyone,” I replied.

To Garius, completion of the Human Transmutation Magecraft was not only a way for him to achieve his life’s goal, but also an opportunity to get back at the colleagues who’d been responsible for his fall from grace. Most likely, it was for that reason he’d set his eyes on me. He probably saw himself in me, a boy with Amber Eyes who’d been persecuted by the world.

“Heh heh heh... You really are my son, Abel. I think it’s time I give you your final task,” he said, before tossing me a sword.

It looked very well-kept, but reeked of blood. There was no doubt that he'd used this very blade to end the lives of many children.

"I'll leave the finishing touches to you," he said cryptically, before opening the lid covering a nearby tub.

Crammed inside was Maria.

"Mm! Mmmmf!"

She seemed to be conscious, but was fully bound and unable to move. She was gripping the origami that I'd given her, and it was clear she was desperately trying to fight the emotions welling up inside her.

"Okay..."

At this point, I wasn't scared of killing someone. I'd tried to draw a line between myself and others so that, when the time came, I'd have the resolve to complete the act.

My eyes met with Maria's. As I pointed the blade at her, fear and despair filled her eyes. But then...

"What is the meaning of this, Abel?" said Garius. His tone was gentle, but the look on his face was stern.

Strands of his hair fluttered to the ground, having been severed from his head when I'd suddenly slashed at him.

"I've changed my mind," I said. "Let's fight."

Good grief. I can't believe I chose the more difficult option. It wasn't that I hesitated to kill Maria, but...I couldn't allow myself to kill someone that I'd once saved. It felt like that would have been going against my personal creed, whatever that might have been.

"Heh heh heh... Are you crazy? You think *you* can beat *me*?"

There was no trace of surprise or discomposure on his face. All I saw was his usual calm expression. In a battle between mages, one's first target shouldn't have been the opponent themselves, but their emotions. Precise control of magecraft demanded a stable emotional state. He was the one who'd taught me that.

“It’s a shame, truly. You can’t defeat me.”

I could tell from his expression that he was serious. He had absolutely no intention of pulling his punches. He wanted to kill me here and now.

After Amber Eyes, Ashen Eyes were known as the next strongest. Those with Amber Eyes could fight on both the front and back lines, due to their ability to fortify their bodies and also to regenerate. Because of that, they were extremely versatile.

“Ice Needles! Spread Rain!”

Garius struck first. As expected, he didn’t use any Crimson Eye magecraft. He didn’t want to damage this underground facility, which held all the results of his research. It was only logical—producing flames of any kind here would have been extremely risky.

I was in the same boat. If I used fire in this closed space, all the oxygen would quickly be depleted. It would’ve been one thing if it was just me, but Maria was here too, and she was just a child. Depriving us of oxygen would leave us in dire straits.

Not long after, the room was filled with high-pitched clanging and the crackling of ice as it shattered. I dodged some of the ice needles, and would sometimes be able to deflect them as I searched for an opportunity to fight back.

“Too slow!”

His attack was just a distraction. He’d used Body Fortification Magecraft to instantly wrap around behind me, sending me flying with a kick.

“I see. In that moment, you adjusted your stance to absorb the shock and soften the blow, huh?” said Garius. “What a shame. Another ten years of training under me, and you’d be the strongest mage that ever lived.”

I couldn’t deny his words. In general, those with Amber Eyes grew at a slower rate than others. Furthermore, my body was still immature. His stamina eclipsed mine. No matter how I looked at it, I was at a disadvantage.

“Come on! Is that it? Done already?!”

What followed was simply a one-sided beatdown. Using his Ashen Eyes to their full potential, he fortified his body, hitting me over and over again even though I was already covered in wounds.

However, not too long after that, something most strange happened. Having been the target of his violence and ire, my body, which had become almost unrecognizable, now dissipated into thin air like smoke.

“What the...” The shock returned him to his senses.

“Did you have a nice dream?”

The ability to interfere with someone’s mind and force them to see a dream—Trance Magecraft—had been developed by none other than Garius himself. However, the base of the composition he’d developed was riddled with superfluous additions, and as a result could not be used under real battle conditions.

Fortunately, I’d been blessed not only with the perfect environment in which to learn magecraft, but also the time to do so. After poring over an essay I’d found in my room, I’d been able to improve his magecraft.

“Th-That’s not possible! That magecraft is supposed to be incomplete!” Suddenly, all the composure had leaked out of his expression. “Did you... Did you hide your true strength from me? Was it all to prepare for this day...?”

He was half right, but the other half of what he was saying was pure speculation. After all, even I had never dreamed the day when I’d have to fight Garius would come. No—it was for another foolish reason that I’d hidden my strength.

“You...*monster*,” he said, his expression filled with contempt and fear.

Oh, right. I remember this look.

Get out, you monster! In his face, I saw the face of the woman I used to call “mother.” I’d never wanted him to look at me that way, so I’d hidden my true power until now.

“This is farewell... Garius.”

Taking down an opponent who’d lost their composure was extremely simple. I

dodged his attacks with ease and pierced him with the sword I held. His blood splashed on my face. It was warm. And now, as he leaned into me, his strength fading, I got the sense that he'd grown much thinner than he was when I'd first met him.



I'll explain what happened after that. After I took down Garius, I leaked all of his evil deeds to the world. The juicy story of a formerly famous court mage doing all kinds of heinous acts spread like wildfire.

I heard that, after our fight, when Garius regained consciousness, he used magecraft to kill himself. He probably saw it as a good time to call it quits. That was the path he'd chosen, and I had nothing more to say on the matter.

I knew that the things he'd done couldn't be forgiven by societal standards, but even so, I felt grateful to him. This was only natural. If he hadn't taken me in, I probably would've died a dog's death that day, without ever knowing who I was.

Most likely, I would never forget the warmth of his hand when he'd reached out to me on that freezing winter night. I placed the flowers I was carrying on his grave and stood up. With this, I had nothing left to tie me to this town.

"Abel!"

A voice called out to me. I'd reunited with her when I'd made the decision to set out.

"I knew it. You're here."

Standing in my way was a familiar girl. Maybe it was just because I hadn't seen her in a while, but she'd really grown up. After everything that had happened at the orphanage, all the surviving children that were being monitored by the government were taken to a safe place.

"Are you really serious...about leaving?" Maria asked, her eyes tinged with unease.

Her clothes were decorated with a pattern of a dragon and a sword—famously, the symbol of a certain noble household in this town. That's right—

she'd been taken in by a noble family. I'd thought that, with her extraordinary talent and beauty, Maria would immediately be picked up by someone, but...I'd never expected the ones who adopted her would be nobles.

"Yeah, I'm leaving today."

For the past few days, I'd been going around trying to pull together the funds for my journey. My current objective was to relocate to the royal capital. Talented mages gathered there, pooling their power in case of a demon attack. I intended to focus on blending in and improving my strength, knowing it was necessary for what was to come.

"Please, would you take me with you?!" Maria asked, resolute, though she watched me carefully.

Just the fact that she was here at all told me exactly what her objective was. That was why I had to make sure to shut her down.

"No. You'd just be dead weight."

"But..."

"Enough. You heard me. Now get going. I don't ever want to see you again."

Maria shivered, and a single tear rolled down her cheek. I knew that Maria had talent as a mage, but she needed time for that talent to develop. I didn't want her to be spurred to follow me by fleeting feelings. She'd finally found happiness, and I didn't want her to just toss it to the wayside.



“I’m...I’m going to become strong! Strong enough to be your equal, Abel!”
Maria yelled from behind me.

Her voice was tinged with frustration, anger, and sorrow. It was a while before her voice stopped echoing in my ears. Ultimately, the next time I met her would be almost ten years down the road.



Now I’ll discuss what happened shortly after that point. I successfully uprooted my life and moved to the royal capital. After a year or so, I was able to prove that it was impossible to produce the soul of a living organism through magecraft, and as a result, put a complete stop to the Human Transmutation craze that’d swept the world.

I’d done so under a pseudonym, Depornix, publishing my “Final Theorem,” which, coincidentally, would appear as a question on my entrance exam two hundred years into the future. Of course, my past self had no way of knowing that would happen.

Chapter 2: Living Underground (The Hero of Water Arc)

Time flew, and before I knew it, winter had arrived. It'd been almost two years since I had left the orphanage. Since then, I'd gone to the royal capital, and for various reasons, I'd moved my base of operations underground—into the sewers, which were roughly ten meters below the surface.

“Welcome back, Abel!”

After opening the manhole and climbing down the ladder, I saw the faces of two children as they ran up to me. In the time that I'd lived here, I'd essentially become their big brother.

“Abel! Look! I killed this huge rat!”

“Heh heh, but the rat I got's *much* bigger!”

They'd been living in the sewers long before I arrived. The underground was a place of acceptance for kids like me, who'd found their way down here due to their own various circumstances.

“We're havin' a feast tonight!” said the two kids, grinning as they held out their catches.

This was an era of survival of the fittest—the strong tyrannized the weak. The majority of the kids that lived down here had lost their parents in the war and been run out of their homes. But the world wasn't so kind as to allow kids with nobody to fall back on to live on their own. As such, these orphans had gathered here in the underground, and through cooperation, they were more or less able to make it through each day.

“Rats carry all kinds of diseases, so don't forget to use Detoxification Magecraft first, okay?”

“Yeah!” they happily agreed.

When I first arrived down here, their quality of life was horrific. Given both

the lack of space and food, fights broke out daily. That was why I'd taught them magecraft—to enrich their lives.

“Hey, Abel! Listen to this! The magecraft you taught me is super handy! So, like—”

Though I didn't get the sense that any of these children were especially gifted with magecraft, people were capable of amazing feats when they had their backs against the wall. The children didn't fuss when I taught them things, and now they were learning magecraft at the same level as adults.

“Oh, right. Were you able to get the things I asked for?”

“Yeah! Of course, Abel!” The boy began to pull out newspapers from various outlets in town. “You're really weird. You can't fill your belly by reading, you know.”

“Aw, well, I'm sure Abel has his own way of thinking about things.”

Sewage wasn't the only thing that flowed down here. The district we lived in had by far the most people living in it, which made it a hub for all sorts of information.

“I'm gonna focus on reading, so give me some space until nighttime, okay?”

“Okay!” the kids responded before energetically scattering.

Now then. The reason I'd accepted living down here was also because it made it easier to accomplish my goal.

Horror! Eighteen Demons Die of Unnatural Causes! Is Chaos Raid Involved?!

As I skimmed over all the newspapers I'd gotten, this sensational headline jumped out at me. My current goal was to join the country's strongest mage organization, Chaos Raid. I'd been curious about them for a while. After all, they'd come up during my research into Garius's past, as I'd tried to figure out how a commoner had been able to get a position as a court mage.

From what I could tell, Chaos Raid didn't care about your race, sex, nationality, or age—all they cared about was your strength as a mage. Apparently, if you achieved great things in their organization, you were practically guaranteed huge rewards and a high social standing. Before I knew

it, cutouts from articles about Chaos Raid covered every wall in this room.

“Good grief... It looks like it’s gonna take a while for me to achieve my goal.”

I didn’t particularly want to follow in Garius’s footsteps and become a court mage, but there was no better opportunity than this to test my strength. All I could do at this moment, though, was collect more information about their organization, and grow stronger.



The sounds of the people on the surface going about their day had begun to slow down. It was already night by the time I began to organize and put away the newspapers. As I did, I heard someone skipping down the hallway to me. *I know who this is. I guess it’s about time for him to come get me for work.*

“Hey, boss! Let’s get some grub!”

The door flew open, and a freckled boy who looked like he was about twelve years old—around my age, in other words—came in. His name was Rick, and before I came, he’d been the leader of the kids.

“Hm. I figured you’d be coming soon.”

There weren’t many opportunities for those who lived down here to go outside. If we went out without making proper preparations, we might expose ourselves to dangerous situations. It was more or less a rule that we’d only go out about once every ten days to get food. We consolidated all our food in our storehouse and rationed it out until the next time we went out.

“Well, here I am! Countin’ on ya, boss!”

Rick led me out to the outside through a series of underground pipes. This was how the job started. We convened on the roof of an abandoned building, where there were already close to ten other kids from the underground gathered.

“Hey, Rick. Everything ready?”

“Seriously, we’re starvin’!”

The kids who’d showed up were the ones who were more adept at using magecraft. Our scavenging team was the cream of the crop among all the

children. Honestly, they were much stronger than the average adult.

“Off you go, scamps!”

At Rick’s command, the kids scattered off in different directions, leaping off the roof. They were headed for the outdoor stalls that were beginning to close for the night. The sun had set, and there were fewer people out and about. It was the best time for us to put our plan into motion.

It was our rule to not steal from the poor, and not to take more than we needed. While the kids did the stealing, I supported them from a distance. It was our usual way of doing things.

“Whew! A big haul, as usual!”

Of course, I knew that this was not a very ethical thing to be doing, but I couldn’t come up with any other effective methods of keeping everyone fed.

“The sewer rats are here!”

By this point, merchants had begun to anticipate us coming. Weapons in hands, they stood in front of the kids, blocking off their retreat. *Hm. There’s more security here than usual. There are even people I’ve never seen in this town before.* More than likely, the merchants had turned to someone for help to counteract us.

“Heh heh. Catch me if you can!”

Quick-witted Rick figured out what to do about the situation. He stood in a conspicuous spot, purposely painting a huge target on his back, to lead them off down an alleyway.

“Urgh! This brat!”

Falling for his taunt, the merchants disappeared down the alleyway, chasing him. *I see. His plan is simple, but it’s a good diversion.* This meant that Rick wouldn’t be stealing much food, but we were working as a team. Sacrificing one person’s loot meant that the other kids could succeed in their missions. Overall, it should have meant we’d still have enough to eat.

“We’re really rakin’ it in today!”

“Hey, chill. Don’t be so greedy. You’re gonna make Abel mad at you again.”

Seizing the opportunity that Rick had given them, the kids successfully got away with bags of food. From the looks of things, it didn't seem like I needed to be here at all. But just as I was breathing a sigh of relief, I saw someone shooting a sharp glare at the kids from one of the houses.

It was a girl with blue hair—a rarity in these parts. She shot ice magecraft at the feet of the children. Maybe I shouldn't be praising the enemy, but I couldn't deny that her magecraft was top-notch. Its power wasn't anything to write home about, but it was very precise, and there had clearly been no hesitation when it had been composed. She must've trained very hard.

“Good grief. Can't let my guard down for a second.”

Fortunately, I was able to grab the kids and avoid her attack in the nick of time.

“A-Abel?!”

The kids, who'd been so focused on the food they'd secured, hadn't noticed the attack coming at all.

“You're all being targeted from that window.”

My eyes met with those of the blue-haired girl as she looked down at me from the window. *Hm. I'm a little surprised. She looks about the same age as me—just a kid.*

“Eek! What is that?!”

Her next move was to rain over a thousand ice arrows down upon us. *Hm. With both my arms full carrying these kids, it's gonna be a little too tough to avoid all of them.*

“Imbuement Magecraft: Object Manipulation.”

The magecraft I used was one that enabled me to imbue objects with various properties. It was usually an Obsidian Eye magecraft, but with Amber Eyes, I could use all types of magecraft. It was also one of the magecrafts that I was best at. In this case, I'd chosen to manipulate the ground itself.

“Wha—”

Even the girl attacking us hadn't predicted that I'd use magecraft to create a

giant wall of earth. Using wind magecraft to blow away her attack might have been simpler, but I didn't think that had as much of a "wow" factor. On the other hand, creating shelter also came in handy for securing our escape route.

Her attacks pelted the wall I'd created. Yet another advantage of the wall was that it made her lose sight of us.

"This is more than we bargained for. We're leaving. Now."

"R-Right!"

But still, who is she? This is the first time I've met someone the same age as me who's this adept at magecraft.

This was how, by pure chance, I met Daytona—the person who'd go on to be called the Hero of Water. The very same person who left behind the great legacy of defeating the Demon King.



It'd been a day since we'd gone out to get food, and in a rare turn of events, I was out and about during the day. If I wanted to further my magecraft research, I needed more knowledge, which came in the form of books. However, at this time, they were not even remotely affordable.

Up until now, a very kind old couple had let me secretly stand and read from their bookstore's collection, but the flow of time was cruel. The smaller hole-in-the-wall bookstores were essentially being forced out of business by bigger chains that were much more convenient for most customers.

Thinking back, I realized that store had pretty much been heaven to me. They allowed me to stand around and read their books in exchange for me walking their dog.

"I'm pretty sure it was around here..."

Right now, I was visiting a tome store that'd been built recently, in the outskirts of the royal capital. I took the pittance that I'd earned from working under Garius and walked down the main street.

Tomes: Beelzebub. I read the name on the sign in my head.

The sign sparkled—it was shiny, and freshly polished. As for the interior of the

shop, it was filled with the smell of new pages and ink. As I entered, I found that my steps became much lighter as well. *Hm. It's definitely deserving of its name as a tome store in the royal capital. It's got quite the selection. Oh—I think the book I want to reference should be around here.* Just as I reached up to the top shelf, however, I heard a voice call out from behind me.

“Hey, what’s a dirty sewer rat like you doing in my store?”

I’m guessing this is the owner? The man’s beard was so long that it connected with his sideburns. The way he was staring at me was clearly meant to exert pressure.

“Wow, this store sure has a unique way of talking to its customers,” I said, sarcastically.

“Huh? Customer? I don’t see one of those. All I see is a sewer rat! Don’t get cocky with me, boy!” He drew closer to me, and as he grabbed me by the clothes, I could tell how badly he wanted to kill me. “Let’s take this outside. I’ll make sure you never come anywhere near my store again!”

Good grief. That’s no way to talk to someone who hasn’t stolen anything from you. I have no intention of causing a commotion here, but if he’s picking a fight, then that changes things. I’ll have no choice but to defend myself, even if only a little.

“Hey! What do you think you’re doin’?!” a voice rang out through the store.

A blue-haired girl was glaring at the bearded man, with a look as sharp as a falcon’s. She was a little over 140 cm in height, and maybe about a year or two younger than me. Just as I was thinking that I’d seen her somewhere before, it dawned on me that she was the mage from last night.

“L-Little miss...”

Hm? I’m not following what’s going on here. The bearded man was suddenly cowering, as if faced with a fearsome predator.

“Th-This boy has those despicable Amber Eyes...”

“Who cares?! You can’t discriminate against customers because of their appearance!”

“Eek! My deepest apologies!”

Well, mark this down as one of the strangest things I’ve ever seen. A man with a frightening face—probably twice the age of the little girl in front of him—was shaking in his boots as she spoke to him. To me, adults were powerful, people to be feared, but this little girl was frightening him so badly that it was hard to tell who the adult was here.

“Sorry about him,” she said, turning to me. “You studying magecraft too?”

“Why...do you ask?”

“‘Cause that tome’s about Runes, right? Whew. We’re pretty much the same age, but you really picked a hard one.”

I see. If she’s able to quickly discern the contents of this book, she must also be decently well-read. Runes were a form of magic letters used over a century ago. With time, magecraft syntax had become much more efficient overall. But it was incredibly difficult to decipher Runes, and almost impossible to go through books written in Runes with just surface-level knowledge.

“What’s your name?”

“Abel.”

“I’m Daytona. Let’s be friends!” She seemed a little embarrassed, but went on. “Hey, if it’s okay with you, wanna have some tea? It’s my way of sayin’ sorry.”

It doesn’t look like she’s realized I’m the mage from yesterday. I might be able to use her. I had no clue why she was inviting me somewhere, but if going with her helped me achieve my goal, then I wasn’t going to let this opportunity slip.

“Yeah, sure—as long as you’re okay with someone who looks like this.”

Mages usually tried to look after their appearances, but since I lived in the sewers, my clothes weren’t exactly what one might call “clean.”

“No problem! I don’t judge people by how they look. Plus...” *I’m not sure why, but she’s averting her gaze and nervously twiddling her fingers.* “I think your eyes are a very beautiful color. Lookin’ at them makes me blush.”



I have...beautiful eyes? This might be the first time anyone's said that to me. It went without saying that Amber Eyes, which were the same color eyes that demons had, were a symbol of fear and persecution in this world. Most likely, this girl had been raised in a very privileged environment, and was unaware of the fear or hate that demons evoked.

"All righty, then follow me. I'll show you to a really great café!" she said, smiling at me in a carefree manner.

"Okay."

I followed her out of the store. Maybe it was because it'd been a while since I last walked in the sunlight, but the day felt even brighter than usual.



After leaving the store, the blue-haired girl, Daytona, took me through the streets of the royal capital. I'd only ever really been out after sunset, so it was as if I was seeing an entirely new city. The sound of people walking and talking happily was new to me. The tantalizing smell of food wafting through the streets was new to me. The strange outfits of traveling performers were all new to me. The streets were rife with things that stimulated the five senses. Honestly, I didn't find the atmosphere very comfortable. It wasn't that I didn't want to live in a place like this, but more that—for an individual like myself—the sewers might have been the perfect place to live.

"Hey, Day, workin' hard as always, huh?"

"Thanks! You keep up the hard work too, mister!"

"Oh, that a new boyfriend, Day?"

"Huh?! N-No!"

As we passed each store, the owners called out to us, engaging Daytona in small talk.

"People really know you, huh?" I remarked.

"Yep! My pop's the president of the trading company! So everyone 'round here's like family to me."

“By ‘trading company,’ do you mean the Srhea Company?”

“Whoa, you’re pretty in the know!”

Even if you lived under a literal rock, you’d certainly hear about what was happening in the royal capital. As such, I knew the Srhea Company was a midsize company that mainly dealt with food in this town.

In other words, they were a critical source of provisions for us citizens of the underground—and at the same time, they were the people we absolutely didn’t want knowing our faces.

“Two coffees please, on the double!” Daytona placed an order in a loud voice at a drink stand at the corner of the street.

It seemed that this drink stand had outdoor tables where their customers could sit and enjoy their orders. *But more importantly, what exactly is “coffee”?* It wasn’t a word I was familiar with, since I didn’t really walk around the city that much.

“Here you go. Two coffees! You’re good with one with milk and sugar, right, Day? And for his...”

“How do you want yours, Abel? It’ll be pretty bitter if you drink it black.”

I see. It seems that the drink known as coffee is one to which people typically add things before drinking it.

“Black is good.”

This is a perfect chance. I’ll try it without anything mixed in. If I really want to see what it tastes like, then it’s best not to add anything extra.

“So, how’s it taste?” she asked, once I’d taken a sip.

“It’s not bad at all.”

I’m a little surprised. It was the first time I’d ever had a drink with such a strong smell. It had a profound bitterness, and I got the feeling that people would be split on the flavor itself, which lingered strangely in the mouth.

Daytona giggled. “Even your taste buds are grown-up. I’ve never met anyone who doesn’t at least add milk.”

“Really? I feel like this shouldn’t be too out of the norm.”

Certainly, adding milk would make this easier to drink, but I’m not a huge fan of sweets, so this is honestly perfect. I’d only learn this later, but coffee was known as “The Demon’s Drink,” and it was an unusual drink that only a few aficionados enjoyed.

After that day, I would enjoy the beverage known as coffee both before and after my reincarnation, two hundred years into the future.





After that, Daytona began to ask me questions, some of which I answered truthfully, and some of which I answered with lies.

“Oh, so you learned magecraft from that teacher of yours?”

“Yeah, pretty much.”

The looks I got from the people passing by made me uncomfortable. I could sense their curiosity—most likely about what a dirty underground denizen was doing with the beautiful daughter of a wealthy merchant. Us sitting and talking at the same table must’ve been a very strange sight to them.

“So what kinda person was your teacher, Abel?”

“Normal. Just your run-of-the-mill, good-natured older guy.”

“Oh, really? Since he’s the one who taught you, I got it into my head that he must’ve been someone mighty impressive.”

I’m honestly surprised. Do you take everything people say at face value? Most likely, the reason she did was because she’d been raised in a very privileged environment.

“What about you? Why are you learning magecraft?” I asked.

She fell silent, looking away for a moment, awkwardly. But after a bit, it seemed like she’d made up her mind, and she looked straight back at me.

“To be honest, my dream is to be an adventurer.”

I see. So that’s how it is.

Adventurers in this age took work in the form of quests, and made a living off completing them. “Adventurer” was an umbrella term for these kinds of people. Apparently, in exchange for being in a line of work where they had to risk their lives, they were compensated exorbitantly, relative to their skills. It was a path that all mages had considered at least once in their lives.

“Heh heh...” Daytona chuckled. “You’re not laughin’ at my dream.”

“Why should I?” I asked. “Sorry to disappoint, but I haven’t had such a great life that I’m in a position to laugh at the dreams of others.”

That being said, there was a huge obstacle in the way of her dream. Adventurers were typically people like me, who had nowhere else to go and nothing else to aim for. A sheltered girl like Daytona would surely immediately be told not to pursue such a dream by the people around her, if she were foolish enough to tell them about it.

As soon as that thought crossed my mind, something unexpected happened.

“Help! Thief!”

These dangerous words cut through the peaceful afternoon. I glanced towards the commotion, and spotted someone who must have been the aforementioned thief, fleeing with a bag. *I’ve never seen this person before.*

Judging by his dirty appearance, I surmised that he was in the same business of thievery as I was. Maybe he belonged to a group from another district. Either way, he had guts stealing in our territory like this.

“Oh no! We have to help!” Daytona said, getting up from her chair.

If all we’re doing is stopping a guy as weak as him, then there’s no need to even get out of your chair. Good grief. You’ve got bad luck, stealing something when I’m around.

“Imbuement Magecraft: Friction Reduction.” I focused my spell on the patch of ground that the man was approaching.

“Agh!”

Without any friction beneath his feet, the man slipped and began to slide across the ground as if he was on ice. Unable to stop, he crashed into an outdoor stall.

“Get him!”

“This guy really tripped over nothing. A clumsy robber. Now I’ve seen everything.”

The townspeople surrounded the thief and restrained him before taking him away.

Phew. I hope you learn never to make a ruckus in somebody else’s territory.
“Abel! Was that your magecraft?!”

She noticed? Well, this is getting troublesome. In terms of magecraft talent, Daytona was definitely above average. The fact that she'd so easily seen through the Masking Magecraft I'd used was a testament to how great her instincts were.

"I've overstayed my welcome. Sorry about that."

I placed the cup on the table and stood up to leave.

"W-We'll see each other again, right?!" Daytona said, in tones of longing, as she watched me go.

"Yeah. I think we will."

I was lying, of course. It was probably best for both of us not to see each other again. She had good instincts. If we grew any closer, it wouldn't take her long to figure out who I really was.

"Hey, doesn't that guy look like the 'black cat'?"

"Don't be stupid. There's no way that the little miss would be with such a dangerous fellow."

In fact, the people on the streets had already caught on to the fact that I was a citizen of the underground. *Good grief.* I'd planned to get close to her and use her, but it didn't seem like things would work out that easily.

In the first place, the worlds we'd been born into were too different.



The moonlight that filtered in through the clouds cast a pale light over the city. It'd been a few days since I'd sat down with Daytona. The sun had set for the day, and me and the usual team of scavengers were on the roof of the usual building, observing the street below.

"This'll be our first job in a while. I'm so excited, boss!" said Rick, the familiar freckled boy, grinning widely from next to me.

"Rick, I'm hungry."

"Me too! I haven't eaten anything since yesterday!"

In addition to our usual members, we had some kids up here as well. They

probably couldn't wait for dinner.

"Don't worry! Your big bros are gonna get you guys a ton of grub! Just sit back and relax!"

Because of the problem we'd encountered on our last run, we hadn't secured enough food. Our stores had been empty since a few days ago. I felt bad for these kids since they were growing and got hungry easily.

"Looks like there's a lot of unsold treasure left!" Rick snickered as he looked at the various outdoor stalls through his binoculars. He was acting as if the food was as good as ours.

"We should be careful," I cautioned. "It looks like there's more security than usual tonight."

Though we'd been able to steal food plenty of times, the adults were beginning to wise up. There were people with weapons waiting in the alleyways.

"Heh heh. Don't be such a worrywart, boss! We've been trainin' every day. This'll be a piece of cake!"

He's not wrong. They might've upped security, but that didn't really improve their chances of catching us. Still, I couldn't shake the feeling that something was off. Our preparations should've been perfect, but it felt like we were missing something. I couldn't stop dwelling on the bad feeling I had.

"Let's do it, boys!"

"Yes, sir!"

At Rick's signal, the kids got themselves ready. They each activated Body Fortification magecraft before scattering into the darkness and towards the various outdoor food stalls.

Now then, there's a problem on my mind, and its name is Daytona. It was completely possible that she was here, acting as security. She'd been through rigorous magecraft training since she was little, and was without a doubt a superior mage compared to others her age. If she made an appearance tonight, then the kids would need me to help them out.

“The thieves are here!”

Just as this thought crossed my mind, I heard a girl’s voice ring out through the night. I looked towards the source and saw a familiar, blue-haired girl looking down at the stalls from a window.

“Surrender now! I’m catchin’ every last one of you today!” Daytona said, holding a tome in one hand and focusing her aim with the other. It was obvious that she was extremely fired up.

“Urk! It’s that girl again!”

Rick and the rest noticed Daytona too late, but I’d anticipated this situation. I’d already told them the plan beforehand in case they ran into her so that they could do their jobs without any problems.

“Listen up! We win if we get away! Abel told us that this girl’s bad news!” Rick commanded.

“Okay!”

At Rick’s words, the rest of the kids split up, disappearing down the various alleyways. *Good. Just like we planned.* It didn’t matter how talented of a mage Daytona was. We were at an overwhelming advantage with how quickly we could run away in the darkness.

“Hey, you scamps! Don’t run!”

With the kids escaping her range, Daytona leaned further out of the window to try and keep them in it—but then, something unexpected happened. All of a sudden, her skirt was fluttering in the wind as she plummeted towards the ground. I immediately understood what was happening, as I’d seen how far she’d leaned out of the window.

“Huh...?!”

I’m getting a headache. Daytona might have been a prodigy when it came to Azure Eye Magecraft, but it didn’t seem as if she’d trained in Body Fortification Magecraft at all. At this rate, she’d be dead as soon as she hit the ground.

I used Body Fortification to strengthen my legs, and jumped in to save her.

“Gotcha.”

I caught her at the last second, successfully preventing her from hitting the ground. Daytona didn't seem to have any idea what was going on. She wore an expression of disbelief. But as soon as she noticed that she was in the arms of a masked guy, she snapped back to her usual self.

"Wh-Wh-What?!"

It must've come as a pretty big shock that one of the very same people who'd been stealing from her had also saved her. The reality of the situation must've set in because she began to panic.

"What are you doing?! There's no reason for a thief to save me!"

Hm. As she flailed around in my arms, I couldn't help but think that she was actually kinda strong for a girl who I'd written off as being sheltered. But as she did this, something even more unfortunate than her fall happened. She smacked off the mask that I loved so much, and it fell to the ground, exposing my face.

"Huh?! Y-You're—"

Good grief. Though I couldn't blame her for how things had played out, everything had just gotten complicated. *I really shouldn't save people. I should've stayed in character as the bad guy and let her fall to her death.*

"Hey! There are two rats over there!"

"Dammit! They're toying with us! We're gonna get 'em for sure today!"

It didn't seem like I had the time to leisurely explain things to her. If they found out that Daytona, the daughter of a big-shot merchant, had been associating with me, an underground citizen, then they might've drawn some very incorrect conclusions about her involvement in our raids.



“Sorry, but you’re gonna have to come with me for a bit.”

“Huh? What—? Eek!”

Before she could say any more, I used Body Fortification again and kicked off the ground to get away from the adults chasing after us. It was impossible for them to pursue me when they couldn’t even catch the kids who’d just learned magecraft. All they could do was stand there in disbelief with their hands raised towards the sky.

“Wh-Who is that kid?!”

“He’s...flying?!”

Is that what it looks like to you? All I was doing was using Ashen Eye Magecraft to reduce my weight and then Wind Magecraft to supplement my jumping strength. I guess, to people who aren’t well versed in magecraft, it looks like I’m leaping through the sky.

“Abel... You have a reason for doing this, don’t you?” Daytona shot me an uneasy look from the circle of my arms.

Good grief. I’d only planned to bring home food, but it looks like I’m bringing back a problem instead. It’s gonna be a longer night than usual.



After all that, I took Daytona down to the underground for her safety.

“Wow... I never knew this place existed!” Daytona looked around her surroundings curiously. It seemed she was seeing everything down here for the first time.

I couldn’t blame her for being so surprised. After all, the place we lived in wasn’t a simple sewer. Apparently, it used to be a shelter for the royal family to use in times of war. As long as you got used to the smell, then it was a pretty comfortable place to live in.

“You should stay in this room until everything dies down up there. Be my guest and leave if you want to, though,” I said.

My room was in a corner of the underground, partitioned off by curtains.

Though it'd been an emergency, which meant I didn't have much choice, this was the first time that an outsider had come to this place.

"Wow, so this is your room? This is my first time bein' in a guy's room!" *Good grief. She's so laid-back despite the situation she's in.* Suddenly, her eyes sparkled and she became incredibly excited. "It's pretty clean despite being a guy's room. Are you a neat freak?"

That sounds like an oxymoron. Can a person who lives in the sewers be a neat freak? The only reason that my room looked clean was because I didn't really have many belongings to begin with.

"Wait, did *you* do this magecraft equation?!" she asked as she looked at the carvings on my wall.

"Yeah. It's something I did a long time ago."

Unfortunately, I'm not as rich as you—paper is a really limited commodity for me. As a result, I'd carve equations into the stone walls instead of using a notebook.

"Huh? So does that mean all of these are...?"

It took her a bit, but it seemed that as she inspected the magecraft equations, she'd figured something out. The equations I'd written out continued for about a hundred meters, way past the curtain that partitioned off my room. The walls down here were essentially a huge canvas for me to work on.

"I don't think just anyone could do this... I don't understand even a little bit of what's written here, but I can tell that you have an extraordinary amount of talent."

Good grief. She really likes to exaggerate. But maybe it made sense for her to be so surprised, since we weren't that different in age. I'd also worked alongside one of the top mages in the country, as his student. Skilled mages might've felt differently, but kids around my age would most likely think that what I was doing was at an incredibly high level.

"Do you mind if I ask you somethin'?" Daytona's voice was soft, but her tone made it hard for me to reply. "Why are you stealing?"

Depending on my response, I got the feeling that she might not show me mercy, even though I had been the one to save her from her fall. In her eyes, I glimpsed her strong will.

“Because it’s necessary to survive. Do you think there’s any other reason?”

The kids down here typically fell into three categories. Some had been abandoned by their parents, others had lost their parents, and then there were those who’d run away from home. The world didn’t allow the weak to live without dirtying their hands. Though I’d only lived in this world for a little over a decade, it was enough for me to have understood that.

“I don’t get it.”

“I wasn’t expecting you to. Those who are blessed wouldn’t understand those who live in squalor.”

“But what you all are doing isn’t right...”

“I think that if starving to death is the right thing to do, then *not* doing that is smart.”

Arguing any further was a waste of time. I already knew that from the start. People couldn’t put themselves in other people’s shoes. We weren’t made to be that insightful.

Daytona puffed out her cheeks and groaned while giving me a dissatisfied glare. She seemed displeased. *Hm. It doesn’t seem like she’s given up on trying to argue with me.*

“Anyway, I won’t let you be a thief! I swear it on my blue eyes!” she yelled, before pulling back the curtain and leaving my room. But no sooner had she stepped outside than she let out a loud shriek.

What’s going on? Why’d she scream all of a sudden? I checked on her, and saw her sitting flat on her butt.

“Huh? Wh-What are those, and why’re they so huge?!”

It looked like she’d run into a group of rats. It was probably rare for anyone up on the surface to run into rats like this. There was a ton of food for them down here, so they grew pretty big. *Good grief. Despite talking a big game, she*

immediately fell into this pathetic state.

“Need a hand?” I offered, noticing that she wasn’t getting up.

“N-No!”

It seemed that my actions had wounded her pride. She patted down her skirt and left for the surface, her face red.



The central district of the royal capital was completely separated from the outer districts, such as the one that Abel and the others operated in, by a huge wall. A portion of rich nobles lived within this district. At around the same time that Daytona was leaving the underground, a man in uniform was standing in a bright, tall, and conspicuous building. He was Daytona’s father, Srhea.

As a big-shot merchant, he could really only throw his weight around in the impoverished districts outside these walls. The world was truly in an era of survival of the fittest. Even for merchants, exploiting the weak was normal practice.

“You’ve got guts showing your face around here, with your pitiful sales!” a short-legged, long-torsoed, rich man yelled at Srhea.

This man’s name was Bahkraja, and he was currently holding a report that he’d received from Srhea. Everyone who did business in the central district knew his name. He’d amassed his wealth from trade with an eastern island country, and possessed more authority than even the nobles themselves.

“Your sales have been dropping month after month! Explain yourself!”

It’d been many years since Srhea had led the merchants in the outer districts. After his company was absorbed by the much larger Bahkraja merchant company, he was now a subcontractor.

“I’m very sorry that I have been so powerless. There have been unforeseen events that have affected our sales. Things aren’t as stable as they are in the central district.” Srhea, down on his knees, bowed deeply to Bahkraja. Since his head was lowered, his expression of humiliation and frustration was hidden.

“Hmph. Having trouble with those rats of yours again?”

Recently, the main problem that had been on the Srhea company's mind was the thievery that they'd been suffering at the hands of Abel and the other underground citizens. They'd tried to overlook this because the perpetrators were children, but it'd reached the point that it was putting a dent in their overall sales. To add insult to injury, it seemed that children who heard the rumors of Abel's excellent leadership were going one after another down to the underground. Their forces had multiplied like rats.

"What happened to the troops I lent you? How long are you going to keep wasting their talents on those brats?!"

"The troops have been a great help. However, there's one among them who is especially adept with magecraft. He hasn't made it easy to catch him at all."

Without fail, that kid appeared every time the others found themselves in an impossible situation, and then he'd use all kinds of flashy magecraft to get them out of it. Srhea didn't know much about him. All he really knew was that the kid had black hair, which was rare around these parts, and that he was as nimble as a cat. The merchants had begun calling this mysterious mage the "black cat," and had come to fear him.

"Hmph. I know you. I bet you just feel sorry for him because he's a child. You're holding back, aren't you?"

If only it'd been mercy that prevented him from stopping the thieving children. By now, the children's forces had already reached the point where adults with weapons, fully intent on killing them, weren't enough to stop them.

"I've heard enough, you useless, talentless man! I'll take care of this!"
Bahkraja spat.

"What are you planning? They're strong."

"I don't care. It just so happens that I recently made quite an amazing connection." Bahkraja opened his fan, which was decorated with a very flashy pattern, and grinned, his gold tooth glinting. "I'm going to ask a professional for their assistance with some rat extermination."

It didn't matter how strong the children were. He was hiring a bona fide combat professional who lived in the shadows. Behind the scenes, and

unbeknownst to them, a powerful, dangerous force was heading towards Abel and the other children.



A few days later, I ran into *her* again—this time in the humid early morning.

“Abel? You’re here, right? Come on out!”

I heard an energetic, all-too-familiar voice outside my room. But she’d come at a horrible time. I’d been engrossed in my magecraft research the previous night, and hadn’t gone to bed until very late. I was incredibly fatigued. We hadn’t made plans to meet today or anything, so I had no obligation to respond.

But just as I thought that, I sensed someone creeping closer to my makeshift bed on the floor.

“Whoa! Your eyelashes are long! I’ve been thinkin’ this for a while, but your face is really symmetrical too! You’re gonna be a pretty hot guy in the future!”

I know it’s my fault, but I can’t believe I showed someone so troublesome where I live. Maybe it’ll be best if I move my bed somewhere else before things get too annoying.

“What do you want this early in the morning?” I asked, fighting off waves of lethargy to keep my eyes open.

Most likely, she’d made sure to be conscientious of how she dressed since she was going out. She wasn’t wearing her usual rich-girl clothes today, but a more casual outfit consisting of long sleeves, sandals, and a straw hat.

“Wh-Wh-Whoa! I-if you’re awake, then say something sooner! Darn near made my heart go out!”

Good grief. I’m the one who should be surprised. I wasn’t expecting someone to pop up in my room this early in the morning. As much as I wanted to say this out loud, I lacked the energy, so I decided to let it slide.

“Need something?” I asked, deciding to at least hear her out, even though I didn’t really want to.

No matter how I looked at it, we were supposed to be enemies. She was the daughter of a big-shot merchant, and I was a citizen of the underground. It was

probably best for the both of us if we kept our distance from each other. She should've known that too...and yet here she was.

"Never mind that!" she urged. "Don't ask any questions and come with me!" Before I could say anything, she got on top of me and pulled me up by the hand. "There's somewhere I wanna take you!"

I wasn't sure what was going on, but it didn't seem like I could refuse. *Good grief. She really makes everyone march to the beat of her own drum.*

"Fine," I said, resigned to my fate. "But can you get off of me first?"

"Ah!"

This is annoying for a lot of reasons, but I don't really have a choice. I'll play along, and I'm sure she'll get bored in no time. Having made up my mind, I slowly got up and decided to follow her.



Ultimately, she led me to the harbor. I'd never been there before, and there was even a sign that said "*No Trespassing.*" It hung from a building that was rusted from the sea breeze, and was pretty ominous.

"We're here! The place I wanna show you isn't too far away," Daytona said, pointing to a small hole in the fence that a child could fit through. She easily slipped through the hole in the fence, scrunching up her body as she went.

"Is it really okay for us to go in there?" I asked.

As the daughter of a big-shot merchant, she was essentially a representative of the town, and they'd probably let her off the hook if she was caught. I, on the other hand, had no connections whatsoever to anyone famous or important. If we were caught, I could imagine a fate worse than just being beaten half to death.

"No prob! The guys at the fishing harbor are pretty much all my pals!"

I wasn't sure how, exactly, that made it okay for me, but I gave up. After all, I'd decided to follow her around today. If I was spotted, then all I had to do was run away immediately.

"Isn't this breathtaking?!" she said with a grin.

In front of us was an emerald-green body of water that stretched as far as the eye could see. The intense light from the sun illuminated her, and the sea breeze ruffled her skirt. *This is the ocean, huh?* I had knowledge of it, but this was my first time seeing it in person.

“Seriously? This is what you dragged me all the way out here for?”

“Heh heh. You’re taking me too lightly if you think this is all I have up my sleeve. Beautiful scenery is only the appetizer. It’s just a teaser for the main course.” With these cryptic words, Daytona lightly ran up to a boat docked on the shore and jumped in. She grunted slightly as she landed. “I’m pretty sure it’s somewhere around here...”

After a little bit of searching around in the boat’s storage compartment, Daytona pulled out two sticklike objects. *Hm. I’ve read about these before. These are called fishing rods—tools used to catch the fish swimming in the ocean.*

“Here’s yours!” she said, throwing me a rod.

It was a little less than two meters in length. Judging by how the pattern painted on it had darkened, it’d been used quite a lot.

“What’s the deal here?”

“Heh heh. Truth be told, you can sell the fish you catch here to the fishermen. I was thinkin’ that if you catch a lot, then it’d make your life easier.”

I see. If I get a job, I won’t have to steal anymore. The idea itself wasn’t bad, but the terms weren’t great. There were over fifty of us living in the underground. It wasn’t possible for the two of us to catch enough fish to feed all of them.

“Don’t you need a license from the fishing industry to fish here? If I fish here without permission, doesn’t that still mean I’m a thief? I thought you didn’t like stealing.”

Even though I was just a kid, I still had common sense. In order to run a business selling fish, you had to pay the fishing association and get a license. Even a sea as beautiful and vast as this had been sullied by the desires of adults.

“It’s all good. I have their permission. Right, sir?”

Daytona turned around and waved towards a fisherman who was in the middle of drying seaweed that looked fresh from the ocean.

“Yeah, of course. Who could say no to a request from you, Day?” the almost middle-aged man said, giving her a slightly sheepish thumbs-up.

Hm. Now that I think about it, she did say that she had a bunch of “pals” here. I wondered if this had been her plan all along. Most likely, Daytona was doted on by the men here as if she was their granddaughter. If that’s how things were, then they might turn a blind eye to us making some spare change off of fishing.

“Heh heh. All I gotta do is flash my pearly whites, and they dote on me. It’s so easy to lead them around by the nose ’cause they listen to anything I say. This is a walk in the park. It’s like taking candy from a baby!”

It seemed that my guess had been right on the money. Women were truly frightening. For someone like me, who was born unsociable, I saw absolutely no chance of me ever being able to act like that.

“I’ll show you the ropes, so watch me closely!”

Daytona then proceeded to open a suspicious-looking wooden box. My guess was that it was the same one that she used for bait. Inside, there were a lot of long, wriggling creatures. I recognized them from an encyclopedia I’d read a long time ago. *I think they’re eunicids—a type of worm.*

“So what you wanna do is stick the hook through their mouth right when they open it.”

Daytona wasn’t grossed out by the disgusting-looking eunicids at all. She didn’t seem to care whatsoever about her skirt getting dirty, and sat directly on the ground. After a little bit, she cast the line with the bait on it into the water. A few seconds later, it seemed like she’d gotten a bite. The rod bent almost into a half-moon shape and began to tremble, indicating that a fish had been caught.

“Aw man, I got a dud.” She heaved a heavy sigh after seeing the fish she’d pulled out of the water.

“What kind of fish is this?”

“A sea chub. It’s edible, but it’ll only net you some chump change at the market. It looks like a sea bream, so people get really excited when they see it at first, and then get super sad when they realize what it is. It’s a sinful fish.”

Daytona removed the hook from the fish’s upper lip and threw it back into the sea. Now that it was free, the fish energetically swam deep into the ocean.

“Is it okay if I give it a try?” I asked.

“Of course! That’s why I brought you here.”

This kind of opportunity didn’t come by very often. It’d probably be hard to make enough money to support all the kids, but maybe it’d be enough to buy some paper that I desperately needed for my magecraft research. I mimicked Daytona’s movements and began fishing.



Ten minutes later, I was finding out that there were a lot more fish here than I’d initially thought. As soon as I cast a line, it wouldn’t take long before I got a bite.

“Hm. I think I caught something.”

“Oh! You did it!”

The first fish I caught had a flat body and a pointed mouth. *What kind of fish is this?* Its appearance wasn’t exactly nice, but at least sizewise, it was very impressive.

“That’s a beautiful baldy you caught! You’ll get a lot for that one!”

I’d learn later that the proper name for the “baldy” was actually “thread-sail filefish,” and that it was one of the more expensive fishes in this area. *Hm. It’s strange how a fish with a stupid face like this can start to look tasty after you hear that it’s expensive.*

But I was just getting started. The fish took a lot of the bait we had, but soon we weren’t catching anything. It seemed that the fish had started to become wary of the bait.

“Are there other ways to fish?” I asked.

“Mm, honestly, it’s kinda hard. These aren’t the kinds of fish that you can scoop up in a net.”

It seemed that she’d misunderstood my question. It was of course true that using a net from a levee like this would be hard unless the net was altered in some way.

“No—what I’m asking is if there’s a way to easily catch fish with magecraft.”

“Huh? Is that possible?”

It seemed that it’d be easier to show her what I meant, rather than explain it. Thinking that, I used my Azure Eye Magecraft and tried changing the current.

Right after I constructed my magecraft, there was a loud sloshing of water, and a whirlpool formed, sucking all the fish into it at once. Creating ice wasn’t the only thing you could do with Azure Eye Magecraft. With enough practice, you could control rain and even the ocean.

Hm. I think most of the fish in the area are caught in the whirlpool. Now all that’s left is to force the water up towards the levee, then catch all the fish. I waited for the right moment to change the direction of the current, and then the fish inside the whirlpool were flung into the air.

“Wh-What is this?!” Daytona exclaimed.

It was raining fish. All that was left was to pick out the most expensive fish and return the rest to the ocean. If I could keep this up, I’d have a very efficient method of catching fish on my hands.

“Wow! This is seriously amazing, Abel! How’d you do that?!”

It seemed that Daytona was very impressed by my magecraft. For some reason, after that, her eyes sparkled with admiration when she looked at me.



The fish danced through the air and deposited a puddle on top of the levee. Afterwards, we began to pick out the fish that would sell well.

“One, two, three... Yeah, you caught a ton!”

I wasn't sure where she'd been keeping that abacus, but she was using it to calculate approximately how much we'd get for the fish we'd caught.

"This is just my guess, but with this many fish, you can probably get about four thousand cols."

I silently gasped. *Well, I didn't expect this. Four thousand cols is about five days' worth of what manual laborers make. With the way we live in the underground, that's probably enough for a month of food.*

"Wait here a sec! I'm gonna go bargain with them for a bit, okay?" Daytona clenched her hand into a tight fist, then disappeared into an unfamiliar building carrying the bag of fish.



Ten minutes later, she came back from the negotiations, grinning. It seemed like everything had gone well. She quickly hurried back with the brightest smile I'd seen on her face today.

"Phew, I really have talent as a merchant. So without further ado, here's your earnings!" Daytona handed me a bag, and in it was a little more money than I'd expected.

"Thanks," I said. "I really appreciate this, but you can just give me half." I gave back what looked like half of the money to Daytona. I knew that accepting her goodwill and taking all of it would have been the smart thing to do, but unfortunately, I wasn't the type of person who could live that shrewdly. I really didn't want to live my life indebted to others.

"But in return, bring me along for the *next* job, okay?" I added.

She gasped, and seemed to grasp what I was getting at. She exhaled and tapped her fist to her chest, grinning from ear to ear.

"You got it! I'm gonna make you rich!"

Rich, huh? It didn't sound possible to me, but then again, I'd been able to earn all this money in little more than an hour. If I kept this up, I could probably improve our quality of life. And maybe this was all a part of her plan—maybe she was trying to push me out of my life of crime by giving me work.

“Heh heh. I’m lookin’ forward to hangin’ out with you again!”

Maybe I was overthinking it, but her innocent expression kinda made it harder to guess what she was scheming. Either way, though, that was how I started working with Daytona.



Two weeks had passed since we’d started working together. Though we still periodically sold fish, we didn’t do that as frequently. I’d been advised that if we made too much money off of it, the fishing industry would sit up and take notice, and not in a good way.

You gotta blend in and play the game. You can’t keep winnin’ if you wanna have others play ball with you... Or so she’d said. It was one of her philosophies as a merchant, and it was incredibly on brand for her, as the daughter of a big-shot merchant. Honestly, she was completely right.

People like us, who were essentially outsiders to the people in the fishing industry, weren’t going to be looked upon too fondly if we came in and messed everything up. Even from the standpoint of a novice like me, I could see that Daytona had great business sense.

“Today’s job is pretty lucrative! Let’s do our best!”

The way we worked was very simple. She’d locate people who had a problem, and then I’d fix said problem with magecraft. It was like she’d shown me the light. The work was a cinch, and we could make a lot more money than we could selling fish, and more efficiently too.

“We’re here! This is the house of today’s client!” Daytona said, guiding me to a luxurious single-family home built on the outskirts of the town.

I see. We’d had a lot of wealthy clients, but it seemed that today’s was a level above that.

“Hey, Day. Welcome.” A few seconds after Daytona rang the doorbell, the wooden door opened and a muscular, middle-aged woman answered. “Who’s the boy?”

“Oh, let me introduce you! This is Abel! I’ve mentioned him before.

Whaddya think? He's really capable, despite how he might look," Daytona joked with a smile.

Even so, the client's expression didn't relax in the slightest. "Is this really gonna be okay? His eyes..."

Hm. So that's how we're starting things off again? Sheesh, I get it already. Of course, not every job we took went smoothly. After all, there were a lot of clients who held a deep prejudice towards those with Amber Eyes.

"It's all good! He might look like a Grumpy Gus, but he's a real sweetheart!"

"W-Well, I guess if you're vouching for him, then I don't mind at least briefing you two on what's going on."

Even if people weren't trusting of me, Daytona was popular and charismatic enough to wash away their reservations about working with me. Thanks to that, we were able to steadily get more and more requests for work.



After we got situated, the client began to casually explain the details of the job to us, and we got more information about the problem that she was facing.

"Take a look. Horrible, right?" the client said, pointing at a huge rock, over two meters in diameter. Apparently, an earthquake had made it fall from a nearby cliff. "With that huge rock in the middle of the field, it's impossible to do any business! The kid you brought with you's good at magedcraft, right? Think he can do somethin' about it?"

Even now, she wasn't bothering to hide her revulsion for me. *Good grief. That's not the kind of attitude you should have when you're asking someone to help you out.* But despite how she acted, I wasn't about to throw her to the wolves. After all, she was a client of ours, and needed to be treated with respect. I wasn't great at reading people's expressions, but it seemed that it'd be best for me to tread lightly.

"Whaddya think, Abel?" Daytona asked.

"Hm, yeah. I don't think it should be a problem."

There were a lot of things I could do to break the rock, but even if we were on

the outskirts of the city, it was important to be mindful when using powerful magecraft.

“Imbuement Magecraft: Lower Resistance.”

Ultimately, I decided to use Imbuement Magecraft. It was a very versatile magecraft since I could alter the properties of the target object, which gave us a lot of options for solving problems.

“Huh? What’re you doin’, Abel?” Daytona asked, curiously.

Hm? Does she not know what Imbuement Magecraft is? It was a little hard to explain, since Obsidian Eye Magecraft was fundamentally different from most other kinds of magecraft. She’d only misunderstand if I gave her a half-assed explanation, so I needed to be careful.

“It’s kinda like a charm to help me move this rock.”

Ultimately, I decided to explain things in a very general way.

“Oh, a charm? I never took you for a superstitious guy.”

I didn’t respond. It felt like she was already laboring under a strange misunderstanding, but I decided not to pay that any mind, especially since everything was ready on my end.

I checked to make sure nobody was in front of it. *Good. All clear.* After confirming that it was safe to proceed, I gave the rock a flick.

As my finger moved, there was a loud whooshing sound. The rock shattered, showering the area in a storm of pebbles. *Hm. I can’t believe how careless I was. I messed up my calculations and now the entire field is littered with rock fragments. It’s gonna be a pain to clean all this up.* I should have strengthened the magecraft just a little more so that the rock would shatter into dust. I could already see the client getting angry with me for what I’d done.

“Wh-Wh-Wha—?!” the client stammered, frozen in place with her jaw hanging open.

Judging from her reaction, I’d really messed up. *There’s nothing I can do now. Worst-case scenario, we don’t get paid. I should prepare myself for that outcome.*



“What was that magecraft?!” the client exclaimed.

Hm? I’m not sure I follow what’s happening here. Aren’t you supposed to be yelling at me? But instead, the client’s eyes were filled with surprise.

“Who *are* you? I don’t think I’ve ever seen magecraft as impressive as that in all my forty years.”

I didn’t know what to say. It was hard to explain exactly who I was, because even I didn’t really know. I couldn’t even remember my mother’s face. From what I’d gleaned through hearsay, my hometown had been razed to the ground by the flames of war. I had no clue if my blood relatives still lived or where they might be if they did. And there wasn’t a magecraft equation in the world that could help me answer the question of who I was.

“Whoa, what happened here?!”

“Did that kid seriously take care of that rock?!”

It seemed like others had observed what I’d done. Before I knew it, the area was filled with villagers clamoring over the field.

“Hey, kid. I actually have the same kinda problem in my field. Can I hire you?”

“Get in line! I saw him first! He needs to prioritize me!”

As the men argued over me, I fell silent. Not too long ago, they’d viewed me with disgust, but now they were fighting over me. What a mercurial bunch. But honestly, it was probably good how straightforward and easy to understand they were. It was only human nature to want to use someone, even if you didn’t like them, as long as it benefited you.

“Calm down, folks! If you’ve got a job request, you gotta go through his manager first—that’s me!” Daytona said, standing in front of me as if defending me. A devilish smile crept across her face as she clacked away at her abacus.

“Tch. Really can’t win against you, can we, young miss?”

“Where’d you find someone this talented, anyway?”

Talented? Me? I don’t think so. People who could use this level of magecraft were a dime a dozen if you looked hard enough.

“For the record, the services of my partner Abel here aren’t cheap.”

The really talented one was this girl. She had the natural ability to make people love and trust her.



“Look, Abel! We got this much after finishin’ all their requests!”

Daytona was clacking away at the abacus while smiling as innocently as a kid. The sight of her made me feel as if I’d misunderstood something. Up until now, I’d thought that the only way to enrich one’s life was by perfecting one’s strength. But that wasn’t true. She’d shown me that it was possible to live by working with the people around you, enriching both their lives and your own at the same time.

“How amazing is this?! We might be an invincible duo!”

She’s not wrong. With her sociability and my magecraft, I don’t think we’ll have any worries of financial difficulties. I got the feeling that everything was going to work out. It felt like things were changing for the better.

But I was ignorant of what was to come. I didn’t yet know the despair that was creeping up on me from behind, ready to destroy the modest life I’d built for myself.



At this point, we were walking home from work just as we usually did. There was nothing to indicate that anything would be different from usual.

“Heh heh. You bought a lot. I bet the little ones are gonna be so happy!”

After work, we’d stopped to pick up some necessary items. Daytona looked as if she was in an even better mood than usual as she walked along with two paper bags filled with food, one in each arm. In regards to the job we’d done, it’d gone as freakishly well as always.

“Is it...really okay for you to have bought us so much?” I asked.

The one thing that was bothering me a little was how Daytona used the majority of money that she earned to buy food for us. Truth be told, I couldn’t really agree with how she continued to associate with us. Though we weren’t

stealing as much because of how well our business ventures were going, it didn't change the fact that we were still technically enemies.

"Don't worry! I get to decide how I want to spend the money I earned, right?"

That's true. I can't deny that her donations are really valuable to all of us down there either. At this point, I couldn't unilaterally decide to refuse her gifts.

"It's seriously no sweat off my back. It's win-win, since you all get food, and our stuff doesn't get stolen anymore," she reassured me.

If she'd done all this, introducing me to working together in anticipation of this sort of outcome, I had to applaud her. I'd fallen straight into her trap.

"Phew. We're finally here. These bags are so heavy, it's hard to walk!"

In the midst of my thoughts, we'd reached the ladder to the underground. Most likely it was from walking so far with those heavy bags, but she was drenched in sweat, making her clothes stick to her body.

"I'm gonna go on ahead, if you're taking a break here." Trying to be considerate, I went to take her bags, but she stopped me before I could.

"Ah, wait!" she cried. "I'm...wearing a skirt today."

"Okay...and?"

"And you can't go down the ladder first! I forbid it!"

I fell silent. *What kind of guy do you think I am? Good grief. I know you're at a difficult age, but I can't believe you think I'm some kind of pervert. It kinda hurts.*

But as we chatted, I began to realize that something was off. First, I recognized a familiar scent, but not the usual smell of sewage from the underground. It was the smell of iron—something that dredged up forgotten memories from my childhood.

"Hm? It's pretty quiet today," Daytona observed.

She was right. Usually, we'd hear the kids bustling around, living their lives, but today, all was quiet. I desperately hoped that this was all in my head—that I was overthinking things—but those hopes crumbled to dust as we made our way through the underground.

“Abel, th-this...”

It seemed like Daytona had finally begun to feel uneasy too. But by the time we arrived, there was nothing we could do. “Wh-Why...?!”

I couldn’t believe what I was seeing. Lying there on the cold ground were the bodies of all the kids. Even if I’d wanted to use Healing Magecraft on them, they’d been left in a gruesome state, making any efforts to heal them futile. The pools of blood leaking from their bodies stained the sewer water red.

“No!” Daytona screamed.

This was probably the first time that she’d seen dead bodies—she collapsed to the ground in despair, as if all the energy had been sapped from her. However, I knew that the most important thing to do in a horrible situation wasn’t to drown in regrets, but to take initiative before things got even worse.

I used Body Fortification Magecraft to enhance my sight and detect heat around us. I scanned the area to see if any of the kids were still alive. From the looks of things, it’d seemed like I’d made the right call. There was a very tiny heat signature among the bodies of the kids, though rigor mortis was starting to set in. One kid was still alive. *Rick*. The freckles he was so proud of had been stained red with blood, but he still had the same lovable face he always did.

“Rick. What happened here?” I asked, running over to him and casting magecraft on him to stem the pain.

His left leg’s broken, and he’s bled a lot from a cut to the right side of his abdomen. I think one of his organs might’ve been hit. Overall, though, he was still alive, and that was a silver lining of this situation. It’d take me a while, but I was confident I could fix him up.

“I-I don’t know... Some guy we’ve never seen before suddenly came down here,” Rick said, managing to force out the words after regaining a little lucidity.

It looks like I’ve dulled the pain. It was a good idea to use the fast-acting one. I tried to think of anyone that might hold this kind of grudge towards us, but I couldn’t come up with a person that we’d wronged to the point where they’d be justified in doing this.

There was something else bothering me, though. The kids knew this almost

labyrinthine underground area like the backs of their hands. Even a first-rate mage shouldn't have been able to enact this much violence on them so easily.

"Boss, don't worry about me! Run!"

Good grief. You're worrying about me, even in your state? I'm really not a great leader, am I?

"I'll take care of this. Don't talk anymore," I said.

"Run! At this rate the two of you will—"

What happened next would probably be burned in my mind for the rest of my life. All of a sudden, Rick's blue eyes were dyed crimson. "Aghhhhh!!!"

What?! The enemy already set up an attack?! Countless blades made from Rick's blood burst out of his body, slicing up his insides as they barreled towards me.

I let out a sound of surprise. This was the first time this had ever happened to me. Never had I failed to sense an enemy's magecraft until it had hit me. Most likely, part of the enemy's objective had been to use Rick's manner of dying to inflict psychological damage on me.

It'd taken everything I had to avoid being critically injured. I didn't even have time to cast defensive magecraft. As a result, my left arm and right leg took heavy damage.

"Oh my. There's still a rat left?"

The first thing I saw was a glossy, black coat, completely out of place in the underground. The person wearing it was tall—most likely over 190 centimeters. He wore a black hat pulled down over his eyes, but I could still feel the intense pressure of his sharp gaze on me.

Stay calm! Flying into a blind rage over the deaths of my friends will put me in an unfavorable situation. If I don't fight him at full strength, there's absolutely no chance I'll win. In a battle between mages, your true enemy wasn't the person standing in front of you—it was your emotions.

"Oh? It looks like a kitten's sneaked in with the rats." Our eyes met, and a cryptic smile crept across his face. "Is it okay for me to kill these kids too?"

It was obvious that he'd been the one to slaughter everyone down here. Despite the massacre that he'd caused, he didn't have a single speck of blood on him. *He's strong—stronger than any mage I've met.*

"Do as you wish. Every last one of them is trash that can't even be used to fertilize the fields! How dare they try and mess up *my* island?!"

A middle-aged, portly man appeared shortly after the man in black. I felt as if I'd seen him before. *Oh—that's the guy who has the entire merchant's association under his thumb. He has the most authority. I think his name is Bahkraja.*

"Hm? What's Srhea's daughter doing here in this cesspit?" Bahkraja asked.

"I-I can be wherever I want!" Daytona growled.

Judging from this interaction, they knew each other. It was obvious that they weren't on good terms, though.

"Don't get any funny ideas. You belong to me. I purchased the right to decide every last detail of what you can and can't do."

Fear filled Daytona's face as Bahkraja grabbed her jaw.

"So, should I kill them both?" the man in black asked.

"No—leave the girl to me. Finish that brat off quickly, Haoran!" An evil grin spread across Bahkraja's face, showing off a golden tooth.

I had no way of knowing what Bahkraja was planning, and I didn't have the time to really think about it. But at the very least, I could guess that it wasn't anything good.

"Heh heh. You got it."

The man named Haoran began walking towards me, but the way he moved produced absolutely no sound. *I've never heard of this guy before. From the sound of his name, though, he's a mage from an eastern country.* Now that I was facing him, I could sense the difference in our level of combat experience, whether I wanted to or not.

"It's useless to resist. This man's a member of Chaos Raid. Even a rat like you must have heard of them, if you're a mage," Bahkraja cautioned.

I silently gasped. *Oh, I see. This man is the same as Garius?* In other words, he was a member of the country's strongest mage association, containing the most powerful mages of this era. They were shrouded in mystery, but their members would apparently go to help the powerful, who shelled out exorbitant amounts of money for their services.

What should I do? Can I really win? In reality, one of the reasons I'd been able to beat Garius was that he'd gotten rusty in his old age. But the mage in front of me was in his thirties, and obviously at his peak. He'd been fighting since before I'd been born, which put me at a heavy disadvantage.

"You're coming with me. Don't worry, I'll be gentle with you so long as you're a good girl."

"R-Run, Abel!" Daytona screamed.

In that same moment, blood burst from Rick's body, flying at me. *It's so fast!* But as long as I knew the attack was coming, I could deal with it easily. The reason I'd gotten hit earlier was because my emotional state hadn't been stable.

"Wind Shield!"

I deflected the blades of blood by creating a wall of wind, offsetting the enemy's attack. *He uses magecraft to transform blood into a weapon. It has to be a combination of the characteristics from Object Manipulation from Obsidian Eye Magecraft and Body Manipulation from Ashen Eye Magecraft.* From what I could tell, his specialty was Obsidian Eye Magecraft, but there was no doubt that he could use Ashen Eye Magecraft at a high level as well, otherwise he wouldn't have been able to do this at all.

"Interesting... But how about this?!"

As soon as he raised his arm, blood—much more than before—began to gather at his palm. It seemed that he wasn't using just Rick's blood. He was using the blood of all the kids here. I needed to brace myself for his next wave of attacks.

"Show me what you got!" he yelled, firing spears at me from all directions.

Did he increase the force of them to pierce through defensive magecraft? No,

that's not it. I need to think about what he's planning. It's obvious that the spears from the front are a distraction. They're way too straightforward. The real attack has to be the two spears headed upwards, into my blind spot. He's trying to bury me alive by destroying the ceiling!

It seemed that my guess had been spot-on. In the next moment, there was a loud rumbling as two spears impacted the ceiling, causing rubble to rain down on me and making the ground shake.

"Gah ha ha! Take your punishment for trying to mess up my island!" Bahkraja cackled.

"N-No. Abel..."

It seemed that I'd been able to escape in the nick of time. After all, I knew this place like the back of my hand. It'd originally been built as an escape route for the royal family, so there were numerous hidden passageways. Right before the rubble hit me, I used Obsidian Eye Magecraft to open a hole in the ground and hide myself in one of the secret tunnels.

"Clever boy. Looks like he got away."

This opponent's a lot tougher than I thought. I'd tried to take advantage of the confusion to hide while pretending to have been buried beneath the rubble, but it seemed like this opponent was too good to be fooled.

"Hats off to you. You've survived not just one, but *two* of my attacks."

I didn't like the odds of fighting him head-on in this situation. He was a mage that used blood to attack, and with so many fresh sources of it here, it gave him a huge advantage. It was also bad that I hadn't managed to heal the damage to my arm and leg yet. Falling prey to my emotions and fighting him right here and now would only result in the worst possible outcome.

"Hey! Don't you know how much I'm paying you?! You're not gonna let him get away, are you?!" Bahkraja, on the other hand, seemed to be at the mercy of his emotions as he screamed at the man in black.

Good grief. Getting angry won't solve your problems. His incompetence might have saved my life. With the way they're arguing, they might not pursue me after all.

“Fear not. The word ‘failure’ doesn’t exist in Chaos Raid’s dictionary. I am certain I will finish off that boy in the near future.”

Either way, right now I needed to focus all my attention on preparing for the next time we met. With that in mind, I used the hidden tunnel to successfully escape.



The sting from my wounds reminded me of the nightmare I’d witnessed. My friends—all of them—were dead, and it was my fault...a result that my inexperience had wrought.

Daytona’s words played over and over in my head. *“I don’t get it. But what you all are doing isn’t right...”* she’d said.

Ultimately, she’d probably been right about everything. Infringing on someone’s profits for your own benefit made it certain that something would have to give down the road. I’d been full of myself. Just because I was a little proficient with magecraft, I’d gotten it into my head that I was omnipotent. But in reality, I was so weak that I couldn’t protect one measly girl, even though she’d been right in front of me.

I needed to get revenge for my friends so I could move forward; otherwise, I’d be stuck in this bottomless swamp of guilt.

But now that I’d used Ashen Eye Magecraft to heal my wounds, it was time for me to make my way to a certain place by foot. As much as I wanted a rematch with that guy, there was obviously something I needed to do first. There was a stone house on the outskirts of the royal capital. Daytona had told me before that it was where she lived. I passed through the trees and then the high walls, and noticed a man I’d never met before coming towards me.

“Day! Where were you?! It’s so late!” An expression of relief spread across his face when he saw my shadowy figure approach. Unfortunately, because of how dark it was, it took a moment before he could tell that I wasn’t his daughter. “W-Wait, who are you...? What are you doing at my home?”

His face seemed familiar. Daytona’s father, Srhea, was the president of the company that controlled the outer districts of the royal capital.

“She’s not here. The man in black took her.”

He let out a gasp—it seemed he knew what I was talking about. He made a difficult expression as he digested what I’d said. “What’s your name?”

“Abel.”

“I’m sorry, Abel, but could you come inside and fill me in on the details?”

Hm. I’d come here because I wanted to talk to him. To that end, I’d come up with various ideas on how to convince him to talk to me, but it seemed like I wouldn’t need to. If I wanted to fight the man in black—Haoran—again, getting a clear picture of how Srhea was connected to all this was necessary.



After we sat down, I explained to him what’d happened in the underground, so now it was his turn to fill me in on what was going on.

“I owe that man a debt, so I promised him my daughter in exchange for forgiveness,” he explained.

Essentially, his company had been chronically in the red, and he’d personally borrowed great sums of money as well. After this, Bahkraja had set his sights on him. Apparently, Bahkraja’d been born into a family that made their fortune by buying up a lot of gold from a certain eastern country and massively profiting off of it. All merchants in this country found that their influence was too great to escape.

Srhea had been backed into a corner and essentially forced into a situation where he’d promised his daughter and control of commerce in the outer districts in exchange for his debts being forgiven.

“But the marriage proposal wasn’t a bad deal for us! By listening to his advice, our sales have gotten back on track. I’m sure my daughter isn’t against it either!”

Good grief. Now I understand why Daytona’s so mature for her age. Srhea wasn’t a bad person at heart, but he had no aptitude for being a merchant. Daytona’s great sense for commerce most likely came from watching her father and learning what *not* to do.

“No—don’t get the wrong idea. She just isn’t showing her discontent. She’s not stupid,” I said.

Suddenly, memories of Daytona talking about her dreams for the future flashed through my head. *Hm. Looks like I was really under yet another huge misunderstanding.* Even now, I couldn’t help but think that she’d lived a cushy, happy life, but she hadn’t. If we were sewer rats, she was a bird in a cage. After all, she couldn’t leave by her own volition. All this time, she’d been by herself, with her back to the wall, worrying about everything all on her own.

“After this is all done, set her free,” I commanded.

“E-Excuse me? This is a family matter! How about you stay out of it!”

You really sicken me. Even living underneath the city, we kids at least had the common sense that families were meant to support each other and live as one. Family members weren’t just convenient tools that you could discard to save your own hide. Maybe there really was no redeeming this guy, after all.

“Don’t say another word.” I said this warning in a quiet voice, but I made sure that he didn’t miss any of the killing intent I was emitting in his direction.

I’m going to destroy the cage you’re keeping her in. This isn’t for her sake, my sake, or anyone else’s—it’s just something that needs to be done.

“Eek!” The man shrieked in fear.

What a strange feeling. My body feels hot to its core. Suddenly, I felt a strange sensation deep in my eyes. *What is this?*

“Y-You! Th-Those eyes!”

Though the appearance of eyes of the same color didn’t differ much, the specific characteristics of those eyes varied based on the individual. I’d only learn this later, but whenever I used powerful magecraft or my emotions rose, my Amber Eyes would begin to glow.

“Free her, or I promise I’ll kill you.”

I decided that after I finished taking care of everything, I’d return to this city again. But either way, I now headed out to finish the fight. Ever since learning that the man in black was a member of Chaos Raid, just like Garius had been, I

realized that it wasn't possible for me to avoid facing him. To me, this battle was unavoidable.



The central district of the royal capital, which had walls to keep out people from the other districts, was not only much better maintained than everywhere else, but it was also where a portion of the wealthy and nobles lived. It was practically the face of the royal capital. But it also served as a base for the Bahkraja Company, which was in a fancy, very conspicuous four-story building.

“Ha ha. I’m in a *great* mood. I didn’t expect the rat extermination to be that easy,” Bahkraja cackled happily with a wine glass in one hand as he sat on a couch made of animal fur.

The humidity in the room was at a comfortable level due to the cold water that the statue of a monster expelled.

“Mmm! Mm!!!” Daytona tried to scream out in pain.

After being dragged back from the underground, she’d been bound and gagged. She couldn’t say a word, and her eyes were filled with despair.

Bahkraja cackled. “You’re quite the treasure despite being the daughter of that incompetent man. I’m looking forward to finding out what you taste like.”

At these words, Daytona fell quiet, not even able to scream. When humans reach the apex of their fear, they become unable to even make a sound. The mere thought of what could possibly ensue had paralyzed her.

“Like fruits, women are best taken when ripe. Don’t you agree?” Bahkraja asked, turning his gaze to Haoran, a member of the country’s strongest mage association, Chaos Raid.

“No clue. Sorry to say, but I’m not well versed in those kinds of indulgences.”

Haoran, who seemed to have absolutely no interest in what was going on, was sharpening a black metal knife which was as reflective as a mirror.

“Huh? You don’t know the taste of a woman? What a bore. If you’re holding your tongue because you’re in my presence, you shouldn’t. It’s no-holds-barred tonight. You should enjoy my wife-to-be as well.”

The expression that Haoran had on his face at that moment left a strong impression on Daytona. It wasn't that of lust or disdain, but an expression as plain as if he was looking at a stone by the wayside.

"Sorry to be a buzzkill, but do you mind if I get the money you promised me?" Haoran smiled, forcefully changing the topic. He must not have felt like sticking around much longer to discuss a subject he had no interest in.

"Oh. Right. How much should I pay?"

Chaos Raid was known for completing jobs to the very end, but there was no limit to the amount of money they demanded as compensation. When calculating their price, it was a rule for them to take into consideration the time and effort that had been required.

"Well...I think this little job'll cost you no more than fifty million cols."

"F-Fifty million?!"

That was more than Bahkraja spent on the yearly salary of a hundred of his private soldiers. *I can pay it, but he's charging that much for exterminating those rats?!* Bahkraja thought.

If the person requesting this sum of money had been in a weaker position than him, he wouldn't have even thought twice before skipping out on the bill, but the man standing before him was a part of the underworld, and an elite member at that. There was no telling what kind of price there'd be to pay down the road if he reneged on his deal.

Bahkraja bit his nail in frustration at the unexpectedly high price. "Oh, wait. What about that brat? Your work's not done until he's dead!" he blurted out, coming up with a new plan on the spot.

The idea that Bahkraja had landed on was delaying paying for the job. If he could buy time, then he might be able to come up with a way to avoid payment.

"True enough. You've got me there," Haoran said, cryptically smiling while sheathing in his inner pocket the blade he'd been sharpening. It was as if he was anticipating an actual fight. "But this time, it doesn't look like I'll have to go to him."

Haoran began to slowly stand up from his chair. In the next moment, the window shattered, sending shards of glass into the paintings. Then, from out of the darkness, a familiar boy emerged.

“H-How did this brat get in here?!”

Daytona gasped at the sight of the boy, the light of hope returning to her eyes. After all, standing there was the boy that Daytona had a slight crush on: Abel.



Now then. After coercing the information I needed out of Daytona’s father, I’ve finally made it to the building where the man in black has been hiding.

During our earlier battle, I’d deployed a tracking magecraft on both Bahkraja and the man in black. Though the man in black had easily detected it, a magecraft novice like Bahkraja wouldn’t have noticed it as long as he lived.

The only thing I didn’t understand was that it seemed the man in black had noticed me tracking him, but hadn’t even attempted to dispel it. Did he look down on me because he didn’t consider me a threat? Maybe he didn’t consider protecting the life of his employer as part of the job? *No—looking at him, I can tell that it’s not either of those.*

But right now, even if I was curious about what was going through his head, I needed to follow the tracking magecraft first. Having come to that decision, I ran through the darkness and broke into the highest floor of the building.

“You got here faster than I thought you would. Been waitin’ for our reunion.” The man in black, my fated opponent, chuckled in a leisurely manner as I arrived by kicking my way through the window.

Hm. I’d envisioned a lot of different outcomes after breaking in, but this saved me a fair bit of trouble. Daytona was right there, bound to a chair by rope and unable to move.

“Hmph. Despite being defeated earlier, you still choose to appear before me? You’re like a moth to a flame!” Bahkraja spat, a vein bulging in his face. “Kill him! Paint these walls with his blood!”

“As you wish.”

Having received his client's orders, the man in black took out his sharpened knives from his pockets. *It doesn't look like there's magecraft embedded in them. But the materials they're made out of are unfamiliar.*

"Beautiful, aren't they? I've been sharpenin' them in preparation for our battle." The next thing Haoran did took me by complete surprise. He took the knife and sliced his own wrist open. "Now then, how would you like to be cooked?"

I see. He's using his own blood as a weapon, making it necessary for him to injure himself. The blood that dripped from his wrist changed shape and formed what seemed to be a large kama.

"Let's see what you got," he said, readying his weapon before powerfully kicking off the ground towards me.

I can win. He doesn't have as much blood to use as a weapon as he did in the underground. That was obvious since he was using his own blood to fight me. As long as he couldn't go after me with surprise attacks like he'd done last time, I should be able to fight him.

I used Azure Eye magecraft to create a blade of ice to block the incoming kama. There was a clang that reverberated across the room as our blades met. With the difference in the sizes of our bodies, there was no way I could best him physically. I used Body Fortification to strengthen my legs in order to not crumple under the force of my opponent's attack.

"Heh heh. Very good. I like those eyes of yours!"

It seemed that even by activating Body Fortification, I wasn't able to fully overcome the disadvantage I was at due to the difference in size and physical strength, and was forced back up one step after another. Of course, if I let this become a contest of pure power, I'd lose, but at this distance, he was within range of my magecraft.

Usually, humans were warm-blooded, so our blood didn't freeze as long as we were alive, but if you were using blood as a weapon, that was a different story. Blood froze at negative temperatures, and with my magecraft, that was a temperature I could achieve a matter of seconds.

“Heh. That’s not happenin’!” It seemed that he’d seen through my plan of freezing his blood. Right before I could freeze it by chilling the air, the huge kama of blood bent and changed its shape. “How’s this?!”

It split into countless branches, each shaped like a spear, all pointing straight at me. This was a golden opportunity for me, though. Usually, Imbuement Magecraft from Obsidian Eye Magecraft became weaker the more imbuements you stacked.

No matter how seasoned the mage, it was impossible for them to change the shape of something while also maintaining its strength. So I waited for the moment when the weapon would be weakest, then cut through the blood sword.

“What?!”

He must not have thought that someone weaker than him would be able to fight back. I could tell that he was slightly thrown off by how his weapon had been cut in half, but I wasn’t going to let that moment go to waste.

The most important thing that went into creating the best possible magecraft was being calm. It didn’t matter how proficient of a mage your opponent was. The instant they lost their calm, they became defenseless, leaving them open to a fatal attack.

“Urk!”

He can harden his blood to boost his defensive strength too? In a normal situation, my attack would’ve been fatal, but this time I couldn’t cut through the bone. At the very least, though, it seemed as if I’d succeeded in shaking his emotional state. After having taken an unexpected attack, the man in black’s expression grew stern.

“Hey! Why are you struggling against a brat?! Don’t you know how much I’m paying you?!” Bahkraja screamed with fury as he observed the situation.

Bahkraja began moving forward as if he wanted to interfere with our battle. But as he did, I couldn’t help but notice the cold smile on the face of the man right in front of me.

“Heh heh. Looks like I need more blood.”

What he did next surprised everyone present. Using his blade of blood, he ripped his client's body to shreds.

"Wha...?"

Blood sprayed from the cuts in Bahkraja's body, splattering across the room. It didn't seem that Bahkraja understood what had happened. A look of confusion spread across his face.

"Y-You, what are you—"

But the blood began to spray out of him even quicker before he could finish his sentence.

"Aghhhhh!!!"

The way he was bleeding was obviously not natural. Most likely, Haoran was using magecraft to quickly siphon more blood from him. In just a few seconds, Bahkraja's body had become dried out like a mummy's.

"You look surprised," Haoran said with an extremely calm expression. He certainly didn't look like a person who'd just betrayed and killed his client. "To be honest, I wasn't too interested in the outcome of this job." Though I heard the words he was saying, in the moment I had no clue what he was getting at. "No matter how much money I receive, it doesn't fulfill me. The only thing that brings me joy is doing combat with extremely talented individuals. Before I realized it, I'd become that kind of person." As for myself, I'd only really understand how he felt, albeit slightly, over two years later. "Well then...playtime's over."

An intrepid smile crept across his face as he began creating weapons from the blood—eight spears made of dark, black blood. They were very ominous, as if they existed for the sole purpose of killing people. They revealed just what kind of a person he was on the inside.

"Heh heh. Think you can keep up?"

He gripped one of the spears and flew towards me as if sliding across the ground. *He's using the blood on the ground to move faster.* This method of moving produced no sounds of footsteps or motions to telegraph his movement. It was a strange sight.

“I’m looking forward to seeing how well you deal with me!”

It was as if he’d become a different person entirely. His attacks had become much flashier. They were very well done. Even if I tried to attack from his blind spots, the lances around him would deflect my attempts. I couldn’t find any angle to reach him. His strategy accounted for both offense and defense. I didn’t get the feeling that beating his main combat style would be easy.

“Come on, don’t disappoint me!”

Even if I dodged the spear in his hand, there were still seven others flying around that I had to be cautious of. I wouldn’t be able to keep this up forever, and soon enough, I found myself up against the wall—completely cornered with nowhere to run.

“You’re finished!”

I could only describe his skillful attacks as marvelous. Then, in the next moment, the eight spears skewered through me, flying so quickly that they sliced through the air.

“I can’t believe I let myself get a little excited just for *this*.”

The expression on his face would stay with me for a long time. Even though he’d won, he seemed very disappointed. After seeing him kill his client without hesitation, I began to understand the idea that he was a person who could only derive pleasure from battle.

And then...

“Did you have a nice dream?” I asked him, as I dispelled the illusion he was looking at.

As soon as I did, the body that he thought he’d pierced with his spears melted into thin air.

“Wha—?!”

This was surely a very surprising development for the man in black. Garius might have developed the theory behind this magecraft, but I’d perfected its use in battle. It was essentially my own original spell that nobody had any knowledge of. It didn’t matter how many battles he had under his belt; there

was no way he could've known that this was coming.

"That magecraft... That's the same one that old loser used!"

I see. So he knows Garius. I'd known that this man was a member of Chaos Raid, but it came as a surprise that he knew Garius too.

"Heh heh... Ha ha ha ha!" Now he seemed in great spirits, despite having been the victim of an unexpected magecraft, and laughed loudly while fixing his hat. "Magnificent! You're an even greater talent than I ever could've expected."

The amount of mana he was exerting rose. He was the epitome of difficult to deal with. From the looks of things, he must've had another card hidden up his sleeve. Everything up till this moment had just been him getting a feel for my level of skill.

"Finally...I can enjoy a real hunt at my full strength."

But unfortunately for him, things weren't about to go the way he thought. Our values regarding battle were polar opposites. *Sorry, but I'm nowhere as interested in fighting as you are. I don't have the bandwidth to enjoy it.*

"No. This fight's over."

It was best to kill enemies before they could get serious. That's why, just in case, I'd set up my final magecraft in order to finish the battle as quickly as possible.

The man gasped. The scene before me was as grotesque as the one I'd seen in the underground. His body began to boil and his limbs began to swell, turning a reddish black. Then there was the sound of flesh being rendered and torn, and eventually, his own blood tore through his body in the form of blades.

"This is *my* magecraft..."

Well spotted. Thinking back, it'd already been about six hours since I'd first seen his magecraft. With that much time, I could analyze it and make something similar. Of course, I couldn't use it like he could, with the same speed and precision, but thanks to my Illusion Magecraft, I'd been able to buy myself time.

"Urgh! This level of magecraft isn't—"

He desperately tried to control his own blood, but it was already too late. In a

battle between mages, the first to lose control of their emotions would lose the fight. He must've been thrown off by how the magecraft he'd spent years perfecting had been copied. Even if he was its creator, though, in the state he was in, there was no way for him to overwrite the magecraft I'd cast on him. The interesting thing about humans was that, despite having mental and physical strength, even the strongest of mages became frail as soon as they fell apart emotionally.

"This isn't possible! I...can't die here!"

He collapsed to the ground from the blood loss, his body shriveling up. *Blood magecraft, huh? It's not something that you can always readily use. I doubt I'll have many opportunities to do so, but in the sense of getting revenge for the friends he killed, this is good enough.* In terms of pure combat skill, I should've been beneath him, but the fact that I was still able to pull out a victory showed that I was hungrier for it than he was. That was all.

Immediately, I felt a faint presence. There was a rustling of wings, and suddenly, an owl flew into the room. It had beautiful, black feathers, and was clearly someone's pet. It gave me a letter which read:

Invitation:

As proof of our recognition of your strength, we invite you to Chaos Raid.

If you have the will to use your blade to cut through the darkness, head to the place indicated below.

Hm. Until I confirmed it with my own eyes, I would remain in doubt, but it seemed like the information I'd heard before was right on the money.

There were many different ways to join Chaos Raid, but since they only accepted the best of the best, all of them were very difficult. There was only one option that I could take as someone with no connections to any members—to kill one of them. That was the condition for joining them.

Now then. I've gotten revenge for my friends, and I've accomplished my goal

of being invited to join Chaos Raid. There's no reason for me to stay here any longer. With a newfound determination, I turned on my heel.

“Abel!” Just as I did, I heard her voice. She must’ve freed herself under her own strength during my battle. There was worry in her eyes. “Will... Will we meet again?!”

As usual, her intuition is great. She can probably guess where I’m heading next.

“Yeah. I think we will.”

Of course, this was a lie. It was best if we never met again. I’d killed my teacher, and let my friends die. The path I walked now lay not in the light. I could never take such a route. I was always destined to live in the shadows.

“I know we will! We definitely will!” She kept yelling this, but this time, I didn’t turn around.

The wounds I’d received in the previous battle were beginning to produce a stabbing pain. The moonlight that poured in from a gap through the clouds lit my path forward. I perched myself on the windowsill before leaping into the darkness.

Chapter 3: The Town of the Reanimated Dead (The Hero of Ash Arc)

The days of me living in the underground of the royal capital were so far behind me that it almost felt like they'd never happened at all. Two years had passed since then, and I'd been living a hectic lifestyle after entering the country's strongest magecraft organization, Chaos Raid.

"Eek! Stay away! Pleeese stop!"

It didn't matter when or where they were—my jobs were always filled with the stench of blood and smoke.

"Somebody, stop him!"

"How does this brat move like that?!"

My new occupation was killing people whose faces and names I didn't know, as I was ordered. I couldn't recall how many people I'd killed by this point. I'd stopped counting after ten because it had begun to feel pointless.

Today's job seemed to involve killing an important former noble who'd switched sides, and was now working with anti-government guerrillas.

I had no way of knowing the name of the one who'd requested me for this job. I had essentially been hired to act as an agent of the client's revenge. From what I could tell, my target today was yet another person who'd earned someone's ire. I personally held no grudge towards them, though.

"Hmph. The government must value my skills highly," I remarked.

After blowing through their security, I made my way deep into the building, where I found a single man waiting. He matched the description of the target—there was no mistake, he was the one I'd been ordered to kill.

"They really decided to send one of those Chaos bastards for an old man like me? What cowards."

From what I'd heard, he was over fifty, but he seemed younger than that. That was because of the sharp gleam in his eyes and his overflowing vitality. After living in this world, there was one thing that I learned: leaders of organizations had auras that matched their positions.

I wasn't sure if one became a leader because they had the right qualities, or if becoming a leader made you develop those qualities. Perhaps I had no way of ever learning the answer, but I could at least tell that this man was the former. He was a born leader.

"I know you... You're the golden-eyed black cat, right?" he said in a soft voice, lighting a cigarette. "No need to be surprised. There isn't a single person in the underworld who doesn't know you. Even among the beasts in Chaos Raid, you've made a name for yourself as the youngest to ever join, and as a monster who's shot straight to the top. Ha ha. How blessed am I to have such a celebrity shepherd me off to the next world?"

Good grief. It looks like today's target loves to flap his gums an annoying amount. In general, for Chaos Raid jobs, our targets had two basic reactions to us. One feared death and tried to run, and the other rejected death and tried to make a last stand. The man standing before me was obviously the latter. Having seen him, I could immediately tell that much.

He let out a booming laugh. "Did you really expect me to say that? Sorry, brat, but this'll be where I lay *you* to rest!" After finishing his obvious act, he quickly took off his jacket. Most likely, he was using drugs of some sort to raise his combat abilities. His muscles bulged unnaturally, making him look like a very bulky martial artist. "Dieeeeeee!"

He's fast. In terms of physical prowess and talent as a mage, he's easily first class. Or at least, if I'd met him two years ago, I might've thought that.

"Mumei."

I drew my favorite sword, Mumei. I didn't particularly prefer using weapons, but it was a Chaos Raid rule for members to carry one on their person, so I'd been given this one. The sword itself was light, sturdy, and made with a metal that was a great conductor for mana. It felt great to use, so I'd happily accepted it and begun to carry it around with me. Meanwhile, other people had begun

calling it “Mumei,” because, ironically enough, it meant “nameless,” so I ended up following suit.

Another rule of Chaos Raid was that weapons bequeathed by the organization needed to be named. In the time that I’d stubbornly resisted that rule, other people had ended up naming it in my stead.

“Squirrely little thing, aren’t you? Your luck’s run out. Next time, I’ll break that flimsy neck of yours. That’s a promise!” he growled.

I agree. Your luck’s run out.

There was a certain phenomenon that happened to people who were cut while they were using Body Fortification Magecraft. That is, there was a delay between the damage from the cut appearing and them having the realization that they were done for.

“Wha— Impossible! How?!”

Too easy. The man let out a dying scream as his body split into eight parts, then crumbled to the ground. *And that’s yet another boring job in the books. Well then. I should clean my sword now that it’s been stained with blood.*

It wasn’t as if I had qualms with my current lifestyle. The organization had prepared the best possible environment for studying magecraft as well as given me jobs with exorbitant rewards. So why was it that, despite having become strong and obtaining everything I wanted—having reached a position where I could actually afford tomes, to the point that I’d filled my room with them—I felt...off, somehow? I wasn’t sure how to describe this feeling I had. Whenever I obtained an object of my desire, it was as though I experienced a thirst deep inside me for something else altogether.

“Looks like you’ve finished up here.”

I only ever heard this person’s voice when I completed a job and they came to clean up after me. This person that I knew all too well flew in through the dark on his two wings.

“Yeah...I just finished. Grim...sir.”

None of us knew much about him. The scant information we had was that

he'd been a part of Chaos Raid for over twenty years, and he was one of the more veteran members. We also knew that he used an unknown magecraft to take the form of an owl.

"Mind if I ask you something? Why'd you take so long to kill him?" he asked, still in his owl form, in a tone that seemed to pressure me to answer him.

"I...don't know what you mean."

"It's no use playing dumb. Considering your skill, you could've killed him before he could even blink. So why didn't you?"



He's as hard on me as always. I've learned during these two years that it's useless to lie to him on the spot. "If I had to say...it was just pure curiosity. I wanted to know what kind of value the target had, and how he fought." Since Grim could see through complete lies, I decided to be only half-truthful with my explanation.

"Listen, black cat, you're without doubt a first-class mage, but you're a second-rate assassin," he said in exasperation, tilting his head. Then he said something that I'd heard a million times before. "Don't think, don't feel—just be a puppet that single-mindedly kills the target. That's our one and only mission." He wasn't wrong. Curiosity was one of the most superfluous emotions for people in our line of work to have. "Be careful not to stray from our path. Otherwise, you too will eventually meet the same fate as Haoran."

It was only now that I was starting to understand Haoran's words a little bit better. Having gained strength, I was paying the price for it by becoming a slave to the organization. As a result, I'd gained what could be considered a stable life. I'd received a cutting-edge weapon, a library of tomes, permanent residency in foreign countries—I was sure that the organization would give me almost anything I wanted. But did that really fulfill me? That was the question that'd been plaguing my mind.

"At any rate, you have a new job. Tomorrow, you'll be meeting another member and heading to a new town. You can ask them for the details." His words kind of hurt. *That's how little you trust my skills?*

"I'll be fine on my own. That's how I've taken care of all my jobs until now."

Ever since that day when I'd witnessed the disastrous scene of my slaughtered friends, I'd kept my distance from others. Though on the surface I wasn't too bothered by it, part of my subconscious seemed to still be chained by these past events.

"You're misinterpreting the situation. You're in a position to raise the next generation." *I shouldn't even be surprised that he can read my mind and emotions at this point.* "For the record, this is an order from the organization itself. You have no right to refuse."

"Okay, okay. I understand." *Good grief. It's such a pain that we can't reject*

direct orders, as those under the organization's thumb.

“Good. Also, the one you’ll be meeting—Ayane—is a talented Obsidian Eye mage. I’m sure she’ll be very useful on this mission.” With these words, he turned and flew off into the darkness.

Raising the next generation, huh? It wouldn’t have been an overstatement to say that this was the thing I was least suited for. *When was the last time I worked with anyone?* I was getting the feeling that this new job would be nothing but a big headache.



At any rate, the important thing was to get information about my next job, so I went to the designated place to meet the junior member I was supposed to be mentoring.

Adventurer's Bar: Rainbow Nell

This bar was located in one of the town's alleyways and was a hideout owned by Chaos Raid. Towns in the area like these, that were filled with bars, didn't get too much foot traffic during the day, making them perfect for hiding out.

“Hello, barkeep.” A rusted bell rang as I opened the door and walked inside.

“Oh, if it isn't the little black cat. Welcome!” a familiar, bald man with a full beard greeted me. He was the owner of this bar and a former member of Chaos Raid. After he retired, he'd opened a bar for fun. He honestly had a very peculiar history. “If you're lookin' for someone, they've been waitin' in the back room for about an hour.”

It seemed that Grim had already informed him of the arrangement. *I wonder what this Ayane person is like.* I found myself a little curious. At the barkeep's instructions, I went to the back room and found a girl I'd never met waiting for me.

“Mm... Oh! Abel, riiight?!”

She seemed a little older than me, and had her hair tied into a ponytail. She

was wearing glasses and a white coat. Overall, her curious outfit made for a strong first impression.

“Sorry, but I’m looking for a girl named Ayane. Have you seen her?” I asked.

“Ehe heh heh. That’s meee! Let me tell you that it’s a total honor for *you* to call my name, sir!”



I fell silent. *How could this be? This drunk is a member of Chaos Raid? I'm having trouble believing that.*

"Tell me your member number, affiliation, and agent name," I demanded.

"Eight-seven-nine. I've been a part of the intelligence division since about two years ago. My code name is 'Sly Fox.'"

Well, I'll be damned. That's a match. There's no mistake that she's the one I'm supposed to be meeting.

"So what's a Chaos Raid member doing, getting drunk in the afternoon? What're you thinking?"

"Huh? Drunk? Off of what?"

"Tell me what those empty bottles are, if not alcohol."

Ayane stared at me in silence, spacing out for a bit before snapping back to herself in the next moment. "What?! No way! Don't tell me that the liquid in these bottles was the fabled 'alcohol' that I've heard so much about?!"

You've got to be kidding me. Could she really have gotten drunk without even realizing she was drinking alcohol? I'd heard that the people in the intelligence analysis division were all incredibly abnormal as none of them had the opportunity to go outside. It seemed the rumors were true that, even among the veritable circus of weirdos that was Chaos Raid, the people from the intel analysis division were considered eccentric.

"Mm... My eyes are spinning...and my body feels warm," she said.

Good grief. It doesn't look like it'll be easy to work with her in this condition. From the bottom of my heart, I felt that the situation was very unfortunate, but there really was no helping it. I'd gotten the gist of the job from Grim, so I could probably just go off and complete it on my own.

"Hang on to your tail, little black cat! You can't leave!" Just as I tried ditching Ayane, the barkeep grabbed me with his thick arms. "You're not planning on leaving her here, are you? I won't get customers if that drunk is loitering around. Can you *please* do somethin' about her?"

I fell silent. I couldn't believe this. With those words, I'd lost the option of

ditching her. It really felt like an oddball of a girl had been unceremoniously dumped onto me.

“Hey. Wake up, Ayane.”

“Mm... I’ll get up if you hold me!”

She’s a lost cause. I wasn’t in a position to look down on others, but objectively speaking, she was lacking a lot of the qualities of a good assassin.

“Okay, barkeep, we’ll be leaving now. Sorry for the fuss,” I said.

She’d left me no choice, so I picked her up by the collar of her shirt and dragged her out of the bar.

“Ack! Auuugh! C-Can’t breathe! Uncle! Uncle!!!”

I got the feeling that Ayane was foaming at the mouth and desperately tapping my shoulder, but I didn’t really pay her any mind. In the first place, she was the one who’d wanted me to hold her, so she was just getting what she ordered. This kind of rough handling might’ve been just what the doctor ordered for this good-for-nothing.



Afterwards, I got into the drunkard’s—Ayane’s—carriage and headed towards the town of Arosa.

“Mm... Mm... Please... Please let me go home. It’s quitting time!” Ayane pleaded in her sleep.

I was surprised by how much she slept. Most likely, the exhaustion had caught up to her. In the end, she didn’t wake until the sun had already set.

“Hm? Did I...sleep a lot?” she asked, fixing her glasses, which had gotten a little messed up during her sleep.

“Yeah. For a full nine hours.”

“Huh?!” I wasn’t sure why, but after I told her the truth, she looked incredibly guarded. “Did...did you do anything weird to me? No, right?”

What the heck are you even talking about, out of the blue? You’ve sure got guts accusing me of deviant activities right after waking up like that.

“Cut it out. We’re on the clock.”

“I thought teasing you a bit would be okay... Or not?”

I fell silent, finding it hard to believe the situation I was in. I’d assumed that the personality she’d demonstrated earlier in the bar had been due to the alcohol she’d drunk, but it didn’t seem that was the case. After I glared at her as though scrutinizing her, Ayane sheepishly began to apologize.

“For the record, I don’t act this way with just anyone. You’re special! I can’t help but act a little bold. I couldn’t sleep a wink yesterday after hearing that I’d get to work with you. I seriously look up to you!”

Her lengthy nap, unbefitting of an assassin, made sense if she was sleep-deprived. “Oh yeah? What is it about me that you admire so much?” I asked, with genuine curiosity.

She puffed out her chest as if to thank me for asking her. “It will take a while to talk about your valor, but you took out one of the seven members of the special class of Chaos Raid, and were welcomed into the organization with accolades! And then, after being accepted, your work since then has just been outstanding! You’re the youngest in our organization to reach the first-tier rank. You’re even a legend who’s taken care of so many previously unsolved problems!”

Good grief. She really is exaggerating. Even thinking about it objectively, I wasn’t that amazing of a person. There were a lot of members of at least equal standing to me in the organization, led by our direct supervisor, Grim. It’d take at least a few years before I would be universally recognized as one of the strongest mages in the organization.

“To be honest, I have a lot of rivals—I mean, there are a lot of female members who are after you.”

I wasn’t really sure what was going on, but at the very least, it seemed that these were Ayane’s true feelings. *I had no idea. I’ve always worked alone, so I never really paid attention to what others thought of me.* Would I one day have to start worrying about my relationships with others if I actually had to help raise the next generation? I was starting to feel kinda melancholic.



While we had that pointless conversation, at some point, the sun rose again, and we arrived at our destination.

“Whoa! I’ve never seen such a sad town before!” Ayane let these unfiltered comments spill out of her mouth as soon as she exited the carriage. “Sir, look! It’s daytime, but there isn’t a single store open!”

The dilapidated state of the town most likely had something to do with the request we’d received.

“Now’s a good time. There’s something I want to ask you—” I started to say.

“Huh?! Have you finally taken an interest in me, sir?! You can ask me anything, but my three sizes and age are a secret, okay?”

“Seriously, knock it off, or I’m gonna break your jaw.”

“Eek! O-Okay! Yes, stay on task! I understand!”

It was a good time to have Ayane explain the details of this job. “This is the Town of the Reanimated Dead. Or at least, it gained that name not too long ago.”

According to her, Arosa used to be a flourishing town whose mines produced quality ore. But some people died in mining accidents, and rumors spread that their corpses moved and began wandering the area. The prosperity they enjoyed did a one-eighty overnight. People who feared the dead left the town, which accelerated its depopulation.

“A Chaos Raid member was sent here to gather information, but they’ve since gone missing. With that, the rank of the mission jumped from D to A,” Ayane explained.

“I see. That’s a big deal.”

Even the weakest members of Chaos Raid—the third-tier members—had the strength of ten average mages. If we’d really lost one of our members, then the darkness lurking here must have been bigger than I’d imagined.

“Do these animated dead really exist?” I asked.

“Your guess is as good as mine.”

It might’ve been a magecraft to control corpses. In theory, it wasn’t impossible to pull off, but it wasn’t something that I could replicate with my current ability. It was possible that demons were behind this. Chaos Raid had most likely come to the same conclusion, which is why they’d sent me here.



Now that we’d arrived in the town, we made our way over to the house of our client.

“Wow! It’s a pretty big house!” Ayane remarked.

In contrast to all the other shuttered homes, this house seemed well-kept and felt lived-in. The majority of our clients were nobles or royalty, but in rare cases, we got merchants who’d risen up from commoner status. It appeared that this was one such case.

After we entered the house, we met with the client, who talked to us in greater detail about what’d happened in the town. Having explained the circumstances, he began to plead with us.

“Please, you gotta help! They’re gonna ruin my business otherwise! Can you do something?!”

“Hold on! Are you saying that the rumors of the animated dead aren’t *just* rumors?” Ayane asked.

“Of course they aren’t! I saw them with my own two eyes! *Everyone* here has seen them, whether they want to or not.”

I’m a little surprised. Usually, there would be a tell or two in the expressions of people who were lying, but I didn’t see even a trace of that with this client. This gave the rumor about the reanimated dead a little more credibility.

“Really? You sure? Where do they specifically appear?” Ayane pressed him.

“There have been the most sightings in the cemetery behind this house. Sometimes, you can even see them during the day. If I don’t shut the curtain like that, I can’t live my life!” he said, pointing to the thick curtains.

There were so many layers there that I couldn’t even glimpse what was

outside. Judging from this, he must've been really nervous about the dead.

"Pardon me!" Ayane said.

"H-Hey!"

Ayane immediately flung open the curtains. The client tried to stop her, but she'd just been too quick.

The cemetery that came into view had most likely been made for those who'd died in mining accidents. It was a much larger space than the town itself.

"Who's that?" Ayane asked, pointing at a young boy with ashen hair.

Most likely, the boy was in the middle of paying respects. He was holding a small bouquet of flowers that he'd probably picked himself. The boy with Ashen Eyes was emitting an otherworldly aura as he stood alone in the deserted graveyard.



“Oh. That’s the pharmacist’s kid—I think his name’s Cain. He’s a little freak who’s always hanging around the graves.”

Then, my eyes met the boy’s. He was very thin, but I could tell that there was power behind those eyes of his. For some reason, he really left an impression on me.

This was how I met Cain, the one who’d become the Hero of Ash in the near future. It was also my chance meeting with a formidable opponent, with whom I’d establish a long relationship.



After hearing the situation from the client, we immediately began our investigation of the town. Unfortunately, however, we didn’t happen across any of the reanimated dead.

As soon as we arrived at our room in the inn, Ayane fell into bed and began kicking her legs.

“Phew, I’m pooped! I don’t think I can take another step!” she complained.

We only walked around for a little bit. Way to be dramatic.

“Hey, sir, can I take a bath?” she asked.

“Sure. Whatever.”

“Yay!” Ayane cried as she zoomed off to the bath.

Good grief. As appreciative as I was that the client had prepared lodgings for us, I wished he’d at least given us two separate rooms.

Ayane returned from the bath, having changed into her pajamas. “Thanks for lettin’ me take a bath first!” She’d taken off her glasses and had let her hair down. Though I hated to admit it, she was a total beauty. “By the way, sir, do you have a special someone?” she asked me out of the blue, in a tone of extreme curiosity.

“Where’s this even coming from?”

“Heh heh. Well, if that’s a no, maybe I’ll throw my hat into the ring. Just kidding!”

I had no words. Ayane was gesturing playfully while trying to mess around with me. As usual, it seemed she didn't know how to keep her sexual harassment in check. Interacting with her any further would have been a pain, so I decided to ignore her and resume reading my book.

"Um... I'd at least like *some* kind of reaction. Even *my* feelings will be hurt if you ignore me."

Good grief. If your feelings are gonna get hurt, then don't joke around in the first place. But as we were having this pointless, casual conversation, something strange happened. There was a furious banging at our door which echoed into our room. However, though there was certainly someone knocking at the door, I didn't sense a human presence there.

Hm. Something's wrong.

The knocking persisted, getting steadily louder and stronger until it sounded as though it was threatening to break through our door.

"Sir, what *is* this...?"

It seemed that Ayane had finally caught on to the fact that there was a strange existence on the other side of the door. I got up, went to the door, and slowly opened it. Standing there on the other side was someone neither of had expected—it was the owner of the inn.

"I-Is there something wrong?" Ayane asked the man. His face lacked vitality, and he seemed deathly ill. "Um... Are you okay?"

Finding this strange, I used Body Fortification magecraft to heighten my five senses and observe him more closely. *Good grief. I wasn't expecting the very reanimated dead that we were looking for to come right to us.*

He didn't have a heartbeat, and his body temperature had fallen to nearly twenty degrees Celsius. I had no way of knowing when exactly this had happened to him, but there was no denying what he'd become.

In the next moment he roared, and four tentacles burst out of his back and moved powerfully towards Ayane.

"Whoa!" Ayane yelped as she took evasive measures.

Hm. You can dodge that attack? It seemed that I had underestimated her. Judging from her movements, she had the minimum reflexes required to be an assassin.

“Eek! No! Nuh-uh! They’re too big to fit inside me!”

As she ran her mouth off with these vulgar words, I stared at her silently. *I take it all back. My initial evaluation of Ayane was spot-on.* I sighed. *From start to end, you really are a handful of a junior member.*

I unsheathed the sword from my waist and cut the irregularly moving tentacles at their base.

“Y-You saved me, sir!”

It seemed that without their tentacles, these creatures were no different from normal humans in terms of strength. I cut off the corpse’s limbs, rendering it powerless, then immediately proceeded to the next part of the job.

“Body Fortification: Ocular Enhancement and Heat Detection.”

Just as I thought. Looking out the window, I detected a small heat source at the graveyard I’d visited earlier this afternoon. I’d assumed that there must’ve been a person sneaking around, controlling the corpses from a distance, and it seemed that I was right on the money.

They must’ve thought that they’d done enough to minimize the flow of their mana to the corpse so as to hide their presence, but they hadn’t been sufficiently thorough, as they hadn’t been able to erase their body heat and mask all signs of life from me.

“S-Sir?!”

I leaped out of the window, leaving Ayane still in a daze, and ran full speed towards the graveyard. *Hm. It looks like the perpetrator’s pretty small this time around.* My eyes met with those of the person hiding in the darkness.

I was surprised to see it was the same ashen-haired boy from this afternoon. If I remembered correctly, his name was Cain. I could only commend him for being able to control corpses at such a young age.

Then I suddenly sensed a presence from beneath me. But by the time I

realized it, I was completely surrounded. More corpses—easily over twenty of them—had burrowed out of the graves. *You can control all of these at the same time?*

He was a peerless prodigy. Thinking about it, I realized this might have been the first time that I'd come into contact with someone like this. Though he only exceeded my talent in one specific field of magecraft, I'd never met anyone before who possessed more talent than I did as a mage.

The corpses roared, and each of them sprouted tentacles from their backs before launching attacks at me. *Hm. I'd thought that these were constructed out of their organs, but they can't be. That would be too strange.* It was more logical to assume that someone had affixed parts of magic beasts to them, making the corpses chimeras. That was the only reasonable conclusion, since simply altering a human body shouldn't have resulted in this much killing ability.

"Mumei."

Of course, individually none of the corpses were particularly good at combat, but with this many gathered, it would take time to deal with all of them. Plus, now that they were dead, they no longer had the sense to hold back and avoid hurting themselves, which granted them much greater strength than normal people.

"Tempest!"

It would've been more trouble than it was worth to deal with this many with just a single sword, so instead, I used an area-of-effect attack, hitting them all at once with wind magecraft. Tempest was one of the most powerful Verdant Eye magecrafts; it dealt damage to everything in an area with very powerful blades of wind.

The corpses shrieked as they were sliced to bits by my attack, leaving behind nothing but clumps of meat.

"Eek! So gross! What am I witnessing here?! This is a huge mess!"

Now then. Though it was great that Ayane had run over just in time for me to finish destroying all the corpses, it was unfortunate that I'd slipped up. The boy had apparently fled at the very moment that I constructed my magecraft.

He got me. The corpses here hadn't been meant to kill me, but to buy time so he could make his escape. Letting my target get away from me was an embarrassing failure.

"Hm? Did something fun happen, sir?" Ayane asked, curiously.

"Beats me..."

Good grief. I was deriving more pleasure from having encountered this unknown individual than the prospect of completing the job. It seemed that Grim had been right. I really wasn't cut out to be an assassin.



At the same time, a certain figure returned to the basement of a building on the outskirts of Arosa.

"I'm home, everyone..." Cain called out as he descended the worn-out stairs to the room that his family was waiting in. He activated Flashlight and began announcing his report to nobody in particular.

"It didn't go too well. The person they sent this time isn't gonna be as easy as the other one."

About ten days before Abel and Ayane had come to the town, Cain had been able to kill a member of Chaos Raid who'd discovered the secret behind the mystery of the reanimated dead. Immediately upon laying eyes on their uniforms, Cain knew that Abel and Ayane belonged to the same organization as the person he'd killed. Fearful of them exacting their revenge, Cain had tried to launch a preemptive attack.

"He seemed pretty strong. I don't think I'd win in a straight-up fight..." Cain mumbled.

He couldn't forget the Amber Eyes that the boy had possessed—the same eyes as those of demons. He'd been as swift as the wind, and his handling of a sword had made him look as nimble as if he had wings.

Remembering Abel made his body shake in fear and almost made him lose his nerve.

"It'll be okay... I'm going to protect you all," Cain declared, alone in the dark

room, but determined all the same.

In order to continue his peaceful life with the family he loved so much, he would do anything, no matter the cost.



A little time had passed since we'd endured the assault by the reanimated dead. I'd taken some samples of them back with me and had begun analyzing the magecraft that Cain used to move them.

"This...exceeds my expectations," I marveled.

After reanalyzing it, I'd come to the conclusion that the magecraft used very cutting-edge techniques and was an original creation. His technique of combining humans and magic beasts, thus creating what amounted to living weapons, had surprised me, but he also used very impressive Control Magecraft in order to move the corpses themselves.

I'd probably need at least half a year of research to even try to replicate this magecraft from scratch. If I wanted to use it in actual combat, it'd take me an incredible amount of time to do so. Once again, I could only commend him for having been able to accomplish this magecraft despite being younger than me.

"Mm... Even if you do it so rough...you're not going to break me!" Ayane moaned in her sleep.

I fell silent. *Good grief. Just what kind of dream are you having?* In a sense, it was enviable to have the ability to sleep deeply even in a situation like this. I continued working while Ayane had a pleasant sleep, snoring away. Time passed by in the blink of an eye.



I took a nap, and when I opened my eyes, I found that it was morning. Ultimately, I'd decided to continue my magecraft analysis another day. The bigger problem at present was how to find Cain.

If possible, I would've liked to use Mana Search last night, but I hadn't had an opportunity during the battle to do that. But there was no use crying over spilled milk. Fortunately, I at least knew his name and face. It would take a

while, but I'd need to comb the area for clues.

Just as I thought this, I heard the strange sound of something clomping against wood.

"Oh, sir! Good morning!" Ayane appeared from the kitchen, wearing an apron.

"What's with the getup?"

"I know *all* about how guys love waking up to the sound of a kitchen knife against wood," she giggled.

I was confused. *What kind of fetish is that?* Unfortunately for her, I wasn't very interested in those kinds of things, though most people might have been. Nothing she'd said had resonated with me in the slightest.

"All righty! Chow down! I put in extra effort to make this for you! I've made some dishes from my hometown!" Ayane said, pointing to different foods which were neatly served up on various plates. There was white rice, grilled fish, and a reddish-brown soup, as well as an appetizer heaped onto a smaller plate that looked like some sort of pickle. Her cooking had a very exotic feel to it.

"I'm not eating it. I've got no way of knowing what's inside," I said.

"Oh, come on! I slaved over a hot stove to make all this for you!"

Sure, but that doesn't change the fact that I don't know what's in it. Death by poison was probably one of the top causes of death for people in our profession. I wasn't sure when, but at some point I'd completely stopped eating food other people made.

"I swear there's no poison or anything in it. Please, sir?!" she begged.

Good grief. What a hopeless girl. I guess now that I think about it, I don't think I've eaten anything since yesterday. As a professional, I should accept this meal as a way to ensure that I'm in top condition for the fight that's to come.

"Fine. But just in case, I'm gonna use Detoxification Magecraft."

"I swear there's no poison in it!" Ayane insisted through tears.



After breakfast, it was time to seek out Cain's whereabouts. *Hm. Doesn't seem like I'm gonna get that lucky.* I'd gone back to the cemetery from yesterday, but there weren't any clues to be found. From what I could tell, there were nothing but neat lines of gravestones here.

"Heh heh. Looks like it's my time to shine," Ayane mumbled from next to me as I tried to think of what to do. "Leave this to me, sir!" She brought out a square piece of paper from her coat, quickly folded it, then poured mana into it. "Shikigami Magecraft: Dog Form!"

As soon as Ayane shouted this out, the piece of paper took the form of an animal. *Shikigami Magecraft, huh?* I'd heard about this before, but it was my first time seeing it. Shikigami Magecraft was a type of magecraft developed by an eastern country that was easier for mages with Obsidian Eyes to utilize. There were a lot of different uses for this magecraft, as it could create living things that could be controlled from a distance just by pouring mana into folded paper.

"Doggo here has a keen nose! With his power, we should be able to find where that boy is hiding."

The dog barked in response. *I'm not convinced.* In Ayane's case, because of the way she conducted herself, I couldn't help but doubt her. It was truly sad.

"Oh! He's already picked up a trail!"

The shikigami had stopped behind a completely normal-looking headstone. Judging by the way its nose was twitching, though, it must've locked on to a scent.

"Let's follow him, sir!"

The dog barked as if to call us over. *Good grief. I'm a little skeptical, but it's not like we have any other leads.* And that was how I got roped into following the shikigami that Ayane had made.



"Sir! Over here!" Ayane called.

The dog barked, chiming in. It'd been about thirty minutes since we'd first started following the shikigami she'd made, and we'd finally come across a large church in the forest.

"Hm? This is strange. It seems that he's reacting to something around here, but..."

I didn't blame Ayane for being so confused. The very pristine church we'd come across in this silent forest didn't give off the impression of being the site of gruesome activities.

"No. It looks like we're in the right place," I said.

Good grief. I tagged along expecting this to be a dead end, but I never thought that we'd actually find them.

Suddenly, I understood why Grim had said that Ayane was a talented mage with Obsidian Eyes. I still wanted to hold off on my final evaluation of her as a "talented mage" until a later date, though.

"Huh? How do you know that?!" Ayane asked.

"Just my instincts."

After working as an assassin for long enough, she'd probably develop the same instincts. After all, the perimeter of the church was drenched in a strong smell of blood.

"Helloooo? Anyone home?" Ayane called out as she knocked on the door, which was decorated with stained glass.

It opened. "Oh? What adorable guests we have."

An elderly priest appeared from behind the door. He had Amber Eyes, just like me. I didn't really want to make assumptions, but I couldn't disregard the possibility that he was a demon taking the form of a human.

"Is there something I can help you cute little lambs with?" he asked with a gentle expression.

"Do you know a boy named Cain? We'd like to have a word with him," I asked.

From what I could tell, there wasn't anyone here but this priest. The inside of the church was peculiar, and a little chilly due to the fountain and waterway inside. *Definitely strange seeing that sort of thing indoors.*

"Hm... I've no clue who you're talking about." However, as he spoke, the priest's eyes very slightly moved to the upper right.

It was one of those telltale signs that someone's lying. He must've been a collaborator of Cain's and was hiding him here. Of course, I wasn't about to act on anything without any solid proof.

"Sorry, but we're gonna take a look inside." Just as I tried to forcibly enter the place, the priest blocked me.

"Unfortunately, I've no business with any of you. I kindly ask that you leave."

Good grief. There goes the option of resolving this peacefully, and unfortunately, we can't just leave. If we did, it would've given time for them to erase any evidence.

"Mumei."

I gave up on conversation and immediately unsheathed my sword, threatening to pierce his sides with it.

Hm. Looks like he'll be showing us his true identity faster than I thought he would. The demon must've judged that there was no way that he could've avoided my attack by staying in his human form, for the second before my sword would've pierced him, he took the shape of a monster.

"Tch! Not a patient fellow, are you?!"

The ability to transform between a human shape and a monster shape was one of the unique characteristics of demons. *So you're a frog demon, huh?* He must've been a lower-level demon, but I knew better than to underestimate him.

Compared to humans, demons were a species that were much stronger in combat. With their physical strength and larger innate mana pools, they far exceeded most humans' commonsense ideas of power.

"Tell me where Cain is. Do that, and I'll leave you with your life."

“No can do. That boy’s useful!” the frog demon cried, before jumping into the waterway of the church. “Anyway, there’s no chance a human like you can keep up with me when I’m in the water!”

Hm. Something about the way he talks about Cain bugs me. Also, I hated to admit it, but he was pretty fast. An average member of Chaos Raid might’ve had a little difficulty keeping up with him.

“Eat this! I’m gonna fill you with holes!” he said, shooting high-speed water bullets at me.

The sound of water flying towards me filled the air, but I only needed to move the slightest bit to dodge them. Missing their target, the water bullets gouged out bits of the floor instead.

“Sir?!” Ayane screamed in concern.

Good grief. You really think an opponent like this is worth worrying about? Have some faith.

“What’s the matter?! Can’t fight back?! You’re makin’ this too easy!”

Hm. You took the words right out of my mouth. I didn’t think he’d be so helpless against my attack. In the next moment, he coughed. *Looks like it’s finally working. Gotta give it to you. You demons sure are tough.*

“Y-You...! What did you do?!” he screamed.

I don’t think I did anything so special it needs explaining. All I’d done was use fire magecraft to heat up the waterway, relying on simple knowledge regarding the biology of his species. Heterothermic animals like frogs couldn’t sense gradual increases in water temperature. I hadn’t been sure if this same principle would apply to demons, but judging by his reaction, it’d been just as effective. While he’d been flapping his gums, I’d boiled him completely.

“Agh! Aaaaaaaaagh!”

Too easy. The frog demon slowly flipped over, showing a white, puffy belly.

“Um... Sir? Could I ask you something?” Ayane asked, wearing an expression as if there was something that she couldn’t follow. *Is there something on your mind after seeing my battle?* “When did you figure out he was a demon?”

“I didn’t. I would’ve attacked him whether I knew he was a demon or not.”

Apparently, mages with a hundred battles’ worth of experience under their belt could easily recognize the presence of demons, but unfortunately, I wasn’t at that level myself. Most of my work involved killing humans, so I barely had any experience fighting demons.

“Huh?! So why did you attack him?!”

“Even if I was wrong and killed him, I just figured I’d deal with it afterwards. There wouldn’t be any problem if I resurrected him with magecraft, right?”

Indeed—it’s better to ask forgiveness than permission. If the person standing in front of me was a demon, then there was a high chance that they’d use their powers to dodge my attack. Ultimately, one could say that attacking first and thinking it over later was actually the most logical decision.

“Mmmm! That side of you is so wild, I *love* it!” Ayane squealed with a spellbound expression.

And with the demon standing in our way taken care of, our investigation of the church and our search for Cain could finally begin.



With the demon who’d transformed into a priest defeated, we immediately began our investigation of the church.

“Sir! Over here! Over here!” Ayane said excitedly.

It seemed that Ayane’s dog shikigami was barking at something in response to the trail we’d picked up. It was pointing towards an altar at the end of the church.

Hm. They’re really following the stereotypical setups of lairs here. We walked behind the altar and inspected it, eventually finding a strange, hidden handle on the ground. Pulling it made a loud noise, and in the next moment, a staircase appeared. Apparently, there’d been a basement hidden underneath the altar this entire time.

“Eureka! Right?” Ayane giggled.

We made our way down the stairs. Judging by how the walls weren’t too

dusty, people came and went from here pretty often.

“Pee-ew. What’s this stench?”

It seemed that Ayane had finally picked up on the smell of blood, which only grew stronger with each step we took. Waiting for us at the bottom of the stairs was the scene I’d more or less expected.

“Whoa... This is kinda...icky.”

Down here was what was essentially an exhibition of corpses. Most likely, this area was used as a testing ground to create chimeras. Seeing bodies that had been modified in this way all lined up in evenly spaced intervals was so far removed from the world I was familiar with that it didn’t feel real. I reached out towards one of the corpses.

“You’re gonna get cursed if you touch them, sir!”

This magecraft work is truly excellent. Despite the number of corpses around us, I couldn’t hide my surprise at two things. First, how none of them were decaying in the slightest, but also how the humans and magic beasts had been fused together at the cellular level. It was as if they’d been born in that state.

But as soon as I thought this, I felt a presence from behind me, moving with murderous intent. Then some of the corpses began to move, flinging their tentacles towards me.

“Sir!” Ayane screamed out with worry, but she had nothing to be concerned about.

I’d already learned their attack patterns. I’d already analyzed and discovered what kind of magecraft was in the creatures, and what kind of programming was being used to make them move. With my sword, I cleaved at the corpses.

“You’re done!” an unexpected voice screamed out.

Oh? So you’re finally showing your face? A young boy appeared from the stomach of one of the corpses that I’d cut. He was gripping a sharpened sword of bone. *I see.* He’d hidden himself in the corpses in order to erase his presence, all to give him this chance to launch a surprise attack. It was no surprise that the Chaos Raid member who’d come here before me had lost his life. Even for elite

magicians like us, a surprise attack of this level would catch us off guard, and likely be fatal...or at least, it would have been for almost anyone but me.

The boy gasped as I suddenly appeared behind him and grabbed him by the scruff of the neck. *Got you. Looks like the perpetrator really is the same boy I saw in the cemetery that day... Hm.* As I held him, I realized that he was pretty light. More than likely, he wasn't eating properly. He felt about half as heavy as Ayane.

"Dammit!" Cain wriggled free and began his counterattack.

It seemed that he was a mage with Ashen Eyes, so he was proficient with Body Fortification magecraft. But now that he was forced to engage in close-quarters combat with me, he might as well have been a puppy. I lightly dodged his attacks and swept his legs out from under him, sending him rolling across the ground.

"Urk!"

An expression of frustration crossed his face as I thrust my blade at him. He must've understood the gap in our strengths. Despite so vigorously fighting back just a second ago, he'd now stopped altogether.

"What's the matter? Kill me already. That's why you came here, right?" Cain said. From the look in his eyes, he'd made his peace with such an outcome.

Well—is there a reason I have to kill this boy? Ayane had been the one with the details of the job, so maybe she'd know better.

"Ayane, is it our job to kill this boy?"

"No, it was simply to conduct an investigation."

Yeah, that figures. Our mission this time had been to identify the cause of the reanimated corpses, meaning that the decision to kill the boy or let him live was our own judgment call.

"There you have it. Our job isn't to kill you." In order to show him that we didn't bear any ill will towards him, I moved my sword away. "By the way," I added, "how did you prevent decay in these corpses? Did you do something to them?"

With the magecraft I knew of, you could slow decay, but not stop it completely. Being able to prevent all these corpses from decaying wasn't possible with the knowledge I possessed.

"The seventh grass..." Cain muttered, seemingly giving up. "There's a plant called the seventh grass that grows outside of town. If you decoct it into a salve and apply it to the inside of the skin, it prevents decay."

I see. So he used both his magecraft and medicinal knowledge to do this? No wonder I couldn't come up with it.

"Did you use the Clinch Method to fuse the humans and magic beasts together?"

"No. That wouldn't have bound them together well enough. The result wouldn't have been as seamless. So I used an original technique that directly grafts cells together."

"Wouldn't that risk a transplant rejection?" I asked.

"Yeah. So that's why I also used a little trick of my own, and..."

I wasn't sure why, but despite this being the first time I'd actually met him, it didn't feel that way at all. It'd been quite some time since I'd had such a lively conversation about magecraft with another person.

"I see. You really thought this through. I'm very impressed," I said.

Maybe it was just my imagination, but after being complimented, Cain seemed to change his attitude towards me.

"I'm the one who should be impressed! You're the first to understand my research so thoroughly!"

I was surprised by how much he actually sounded like a child when he talked about his magecraft. The thing he'd probably wanted the most while continuing his magecraft research alone down here was someone he could actually talk with.

"I'm interested in your magecraft. Show me your research room," I said.

"S-Sure! No problem! But, before that..." Cain said, sheepishly looking away. "Could you tell me your name?"

“Abel.”

“Abel... Mr. Abel...” Cain smiled, seeming pleased by the way my name sounded as he repeated it to himself. “Follow me! I’d love for you to see the fruits of my research!”

Great. It looks like he has no qualms about being our guide. And it looks like we’ll be able to complete our job of investigating the reason behind the reanimated corpses.

“I had no clue that you were such a flirt, sir!”

I sighed. “What are you even saying?”

“Don’t worry! I bet you’ve made all kinds of girls cry in the past without even meaning to!”

I didn’t dignify that with a response. Her cryptic statement bothered me a little, but I decided to put it out of my mind and finish our job here, since that was more important. So, we followed Cain deeper into the church’s basement.



Eventually, we were led to a darker room that was even colder than the place we were in before.

“We’re here. This is my family’s research facility.”

I used magecraft to light up the area and saw various monster corpses preserved in huge, semitransparent flasks.

“What’s this creature?” I asked.

He giggled. “Surprising, isn’t it? Dad’s friends with one of the directors of the adventurer guild, so he’s gotten me all kinds of monsters.”

He can’t be this naive, can he? There’s no way a normal person could have connections that give him magic beasts. I was beginning to wonder if, aside from his knowledge regarding magecraft, Cain’s general knowledge was no different from a child’s.

“My new dad is really kind to me, not like my violent old dad,” Cain explained.

“New dad”? Does that mean that his parents are divorced? Now that I think

about it, the client did say that he's the pharmacist's kid. There must be some extenuating circumstances afoot if he has a new dad.

"Sir—is this kid's 'new father'...?"

"Probably that demon we met in the entrance."

"Yeah..."

The demons had identified Cain as a human with a talent for magecraft, and raised him. I'd never encountered such a situation before. From the looks of things, Cain didn't realize that his father was dead. That would need to be said eventually, but right now, it would only serve to make things more troublesome, so I decided that it'd be best to hold off for the moment.

"What about your mom?" I asked.

"She's in that room over there. She has a terrible disease, so she's pretty much been bedridden..."

Cain then proceeded to lead us to the small room where his mother was. *I have to say, I'm curious what kind of person his mom is, to be living with a demon. It's a very intriguing mystery.*

"Mom, we have guests."

He turned the doorknob and entered the room. The scene that met our eyes was shocking. Though his mom was indeed lying on the bed, she was obviously dead, and had been for quite some time. There were large flies on her eyes, but she showed no signs of trying to blink.

"Th-This... This can't..." Ayane was frozen in horror beside me.

Next to Cain's mother were two servants and also a girl that looked to be his little sister. None of them were alive.

"Oh, Mary! Didn't you promise that you wouldn't be picky with your food anymore?" he said, smiling innocently as he began to feed his sister the food he'd left there.

The sautéed vegetables fell out of the little girl's lifeless mouth.

"Ugh... I feel like I've seen something that I shouldn't have..."

Most likely, Cain hadn't accepted the death of his family. Using his magecraft, it was easy to keep their corpses from decaying. He'd been staying in this dark basement, living a modest life with his "family."

"Cain! What is the meaning of this?!"

Suddenly, Cain's shoulders trembled.

"Don't tell me you broke your promise to your father!" The boy looked into the eyes of his dead mother with a troubled expression. "But I explained, Mom! They're our guests!"

"Don't talk back to me! Just do what I say!"

Cain covered his ears, cowering before his mother's dead body—there was clearly something going on with him. And from what I could see, I could only come to one conclusion.

"Sir... Is this...?"

"My guess is that he's probably hearing the voices of his dead family."

It was truly an interesting phenomenon. There had been similar cases before where young children could hear the voices of their treasured dolls. But Cain was probably the only one in this world who could hear the voices of the dead.

"Cain, you did something bad!"

"Young master, you should know better than to bring uninvited guests to our home."

If I had to guess, they were most likely angry that he'd brought us here.

Finally, Cain fell to the ground. He was as pale as a sheet. It was as if something had possessed him.

"Um, Cain? Are you okay?" Ayane asked.

As soon as Ayane ran up to Cain to check on him, I sensed a presence. A certain individual was approaching us, his steps echoing through the room. *Hm. It seems that our next opponent isn't bothering to conceal how badly he wants to kill us. It's apparent with every step he takes.* Nor did it seem like he had any intention of hiding his presence, making his identity clear.

“Oh? You two are certainly not being kind to my son.”

What greeted my eyes next was slightly surprising. After all, the individual standing there was the priest we’d killed not too long ago.

“D-Dad?!” As soon as he saw him, Cain’s face grew even paler. “Dad, this isn’t what it looks like! They’re not bad people!”

“Cain, quiet yourself.”

“Ack!” Cain grunted as he was punched so hard by his “father” that he slammed into the wall.

He’s pretty brutal. Naturally, the way he was looking at Cain now wasn’t how a parent usually looked at their child.

“You’re the ones who killed my kin, aren’t you?” the priest asked.

“K-Kin?! N-No clue about that. Wh-What are you talking about?” Ayane stammered.

“It’s useless to play dumb. I’ve already collected the remains of my older brother.”

At this point, everything made sense to me. *I see.* There’d been two demons serving as Cain’s father. They were twins, and the individual standing before us was the younger brother of the one we’d killed at the entrance.

“Cain, give me the key. Now. It’s time to put *it* to use.”

“N-No! It’s not ready!”

“You piece of trash! Just shut up and do what I say!”

“Ack!” Cain yelped as the demon kicked him in the ribs. The demon took a silver key out of Cain’s pocket. Then the demon addressed me and Ayane.

“Heh heh. I must thank you two. Thanks to you taking care of my eyesore of a brother, I’ve more or less completed my plan,” he said cryptically as he went deeper into the room and put his hand on a door. It opened, and a huge lump of flesh tumbled out.

“Ew! Ewewew! That’s so gross! Ewww!”

For once, we agree, Ayane. Most likely, this flesh-lump had been made by

connecting parts of magic beasts together. It'd been big enough to fill up the room it'd previously occupied, and now it was ominously stirring as if it was alive.

"Now it's time for you all to be my test subjects!" the priest screamed.

In the next second, he changed into his frog form and fused his body with the meat clump. At this point, he was exuding unbelievable pressure. His mana levels were higher than that of any enemy I'd fought before.

"Yes... Yes! I can feel the power flowing through me!" He had successfully fused with the flesh, and a look of ecstasy crossed his face.

"Eek!"

I couldn't blame Ayane for losing strength in her legs. The demon's body was now over ten meters in length, and bristled with a variety of parts from all kinds of corpses. He'd essentially become a huge snake.

"Dad, are you...?"

"Cain, sorry I hid it from you...but I'll be happily taking this body you made!"

Hm. So this is why he took in Cain? I felt like I finally understood. Most likely, the two demon brothers had been using Cain's magecraft to strengthen themselves. The reanimated dead that'd attacked us had most likely been prototypes.

"Ha ha ha! This is amazing! This is something else! With this power, I'm sure I could even become the new demon king!"

He twisted his body towards us and began to attack. *I know he's our enemy, but I'm impressed by his strength.* Despite having such a huge body, he could move quickly. I honestly couldn't help but praise him for that feat. From a pure combat-strength perspective, he'd most likely transformed into the highest class of demon.

"Slippery little things, aren't you?" he cackled. "How about this?!"

It seemed that his body, which was composed of parts from all kinds of magic beasts, could change its form at will. Suddenly, six insect-like legs burst out of the demon's body as he roared.

“Diiiiiiiie!”

His attack, which used the mobility of his six flexible legs, didn’t seem like one that I could easily avoid. Half out of instinct, I attacked him with my sword.

“Pointless!” he laughed.

Hm. My blade’s not cutting deep at all. Though I’d used Imbuement Magecraft on Mumei, I didn’t get the sense that I’d done any damage. Then, I was struck by my opponent’s arm and flung into the air.

“It’s pitiful how fragile the human body is,” the demon cackled.

It’s been a while since I’ve encountered an enemy that Mumei can’t cleanly cut. I could taste blood in my mouth—the taste of iron.

“Mr. Abel!” Cain must have been worried at the sight of me being flung into the wall. He ran over to me, pale as a sheet, as I used Ashen Eye Magecraft to fix my broken bones. “You can’t win against him! It’s not possible! That body has a hundred magic beasts’ worth of energy in it! You need to run away now!” he urged me.

The energy of a hundred magic beasts? I see. No wonder a half-assed attack barely even left a dent. I could more or less guess that his body had immediate regenerative functionalities, because the cut I’d inflicted on his carapace had almost completely finished healing.

“You don’t get it,” I said to Cain. *Since he has regenerative abilities, I need to hit him with a serious attack to win. I should aim for his head—I can’t imagine doing lethal damage anywhere else that he can’t just heal up.* “It’s a mage’s job to make the impossible possible.”

I used magecraft to fortify my legs and leaped towards his head. He blocked my way forward with his six legs, but if that was the only trick he had up his sleeve, then I wouldn’t have a problem reaching him—I’d already memorized his attack pattern.

“Heh heh. Like a moth to the flame!” Responding to my movements, he transformed his body. Right before my slash would’ve made contact with his head, two new arms burst out of him and repelled my attack. “Ha ha ha! Too slow! Waaaay too slow!”

He was a really troublesome opponent. It seemed that just as I'd committed to memory his attack patterns, he'd done the same for me. The fact that he could evolve his physical form to fit the situation meant that it would be backbreaking work to actually damage the back of his head.

"Sir! I'll help!" Right as I was racking my brain about what to do in this situation, Ayane's confident voice rang out. "Shikigami Magecraft: Crane Form!"

Out of Ayane's coat flew many folded pieces of paper in the shape of birds. *Is this why she didn't help out in the beginning of the battle? So she could prepare this attack?* Ayane's countless crane shikigamis flew at the enemy, and as soon as they made contact with him, they created a huge explosion.

Hm, so she rigged the shikigamis with Explosion Magecraft? By summoning that many, she could cause a chain explosion by just detonating one of them.

"Wah ha ha!" she laughed proudly. "Sir, we won, and it's all thanks to the genius of li'l ol' me! I'll take my praise now! Ha ha ha!"

Good grief. She's as bad at following through as usual. If this opponent was so easy to defeat, then I wouldn't be having so much trouble with him in the first place. Using explosion magecraft underground was also incredibly stupid. Though it was okay in this situation because I'd been able to use defensive magecraft on all of us in the nick of time, thus preventing the worst from happening, it was still poor planning on her end.

"How dare you harm my body, girl!"

"Eek!"

The smoke cleared and we saw our enemy, who'd once again fully regenerated. "Diiiie!"

"W-Wait! Time-out! Stop!" Ayane stammered in a panic.

Good grief. It seems that her actions actually have helped me out, though. She'd drawn his attention for long enough that I had an opening to successfully circle around behind him, to the back of his head.

"It's pointless... Even if you destroy my head, my body is capable of regenerating endlessly."

I know that already. I wasn't going to go for a simple slash attack and expect it to kill him completely. That was why I used Mumei to channel a spell right into the enemy's body.

"Absolute Blizzard." I then proceeded to use one of the strongest magecrafts of Azure Eye mages.

"Using magecraft won't kill me either! All attacks are useless in the face of my perfect body!"

Think so? Unfortunately for you, my goal isn't to destroy your body. It's to inflict necrosis on every last cell in it.

"Rrk! Wh-What is...?"

Hm. Looks like it's finally working. His body was perfectly constructed for what I was trying to accomplish. Though half-assed attacks wouldn't get through his hard carapace, neither was anything allowed to escape it—like cold air, for example.

"Rrrgh! My body won't move!"



Cell death at cold-enough temperatures was something that happened to all living organisms. It didn't matter how great his regeneration was if he was killed on a cellular level.

"I-I can't die heeeeeeeeere!"

The cold air being channeled into him was a hundred below freezing, and his body began to make creaking noises and crack. *So the older one was boiled, and now the younger one is being frozen. What a fitting end for low-life demons.*

The battle came to a conclusion, and Ayane ran over to me in tears.

"Waaah! I was so scared, sir!" she cried.

"Get away from me. You're grossing me out."

"Rude! That's no way to treat a lady!" she protested.

Now then. The current problem is what to do with Cain. He must be in considerable shock to learn that he's lost his father, and that his new "father" was a demon.

"Um, Mr. Abel. I..." Cain seemed to be searching for words, but didn't seem like he'd made up his mind yet.

"Have you forgotten the debt you owe to me for raising you? You ingrate! Are you going to abandon us?!"

"No, Cain, don't go! Don't leave us!"

It seemed to me that he was being held back by the voices of his dead family. That was why I didn't wait for him to decide—instead, I spoke up first.

"Wanna come with us?" I asked him.

Cain gasped softly at my words, and a look of pure joy crossed his face. "I-Is it really okay for someone like me to join you...?"

Cain's talents would really shine if he was introduced to the wider world. I didn't really get the feeling that bringing him into the organization was the best way to go, but at the very least, it was better than leaving him to rot away in this basement.

"Of course. You have every right to do so."

Overall, there were two main ways of getting accepted into Chaos Raid. One was by displaying power that exceeded that of current members. The other was receiving a recommendation from a first-tier or higher member. Right now, it could be said that Cain fulfilled both requirements. There was no way that the Chaos Raid member who'd been sent here before me had been killed by the demon brothers—that could only have been Cain. Also, the only reason we'd been able to get revenge for him in the first place had been thanks to Cain's power.

"Thanks for having me...Mr. Abel," he said, smiling innocently like a child, before immediately looking away to hide his embarrassment.

"Um, sir? Is it just me, or is the way you treat him completely different from how you treat me?"

"Maybe. Who knows?"

I got the feeling that Ayane had hit the nail on the head, so I decided to just answer her vaguely. *Good grief. Even though we just finished an intense battle, none of them are showing any nerves at all.*

But I had no way of knowing that this was the exact moment that a monster would awaken—a monster that'd put the world of the future in chaos.



Let's talk a bit about what happened afterwards.

After the battle, we all left the basement and then destroyed everything—his family's corpses and all—in a huge fire. Cain simply stood and watched, as if in a trance, as the remains of his family were reduced to ash. The wood crackled and embers danced through the air, accompanied by the smell of burning flesh.

"Man... I was so worried about how things would turn out, but everything's really calmed down now, huh?" Ayane said.

Later, Ayane and I looked into what'd happened to Cain's family. It seemed that the town had been attacked by demons two years ago. The culprits were lesser demons who'd been chased out of demon territory and had attacked nearby villages. It was a common occurrence during these times.

Perhaps this was only inevitable, since the town he lived in mined magic stones, which were a great food source for demons. Ultimately, the battle against the demons in his town didn't last long, and the villagers were able to fight them off, but Cain lost his family in the process.

It was probably around then that the demon brothers had discovered Cain's talent and set their eyes on him. Able to tell that Cain desperately wished for a family, they took human form. They preyed on his desire, controlling him using a very roundabout method. After all, talented Ashen-Eyed mages were in great demand no matter the era.

"Um...Mr. Abel?" Cain asked suddenly. His eyes were still fixed on the fire. "Will I find happiness if I follow you?"

Good grief. If only I had a gentle personality that would allow me to say "yes" easily. My life would be so much simpler. Unfortunately, I don't dress up my words, and I'm very frank.

"Don't be naive. You're the one who needs to carve your own path," I said.

However, Cain seemed to appreciate my words, because he nodded slightly and began staring into the distance.

"Yeah, that's true," he replied, in a clear voice. Then he looked up. "I can't hear their voices anymore."

The gray smoke drew a line towards the heavens, and connected to the deep blue sky above.

Afterword

User's Manual

This volume is a collection of stories from before the protagonist, Abel, reincarnated in the present series *Reincarnated Mage with Inferior Eyes*. The first chapter is the bonus story from volume 3, and is essentially identical to when it was previously published. Those who don't care because they remember exactly what happened, feel free to skip it and begin reading from the second chapter.

Also, this volume has been written so that even if you skip it entirely, you won't have any difficulty following the main story. If you aren't interested in reading stories from the past, then please feel free to continue reading from volume 5.

Here's the Afterword for This Book

Yusura Kankitsu here. How did you enjoy volume 4.5 of *Reincarnated Mage with Inferior Eyes*? As I announced previously, I've fortunately been able to publish a book with some stories of Abel's past. You probably noticed that there aren't any girls on the cover. Truth be told, this is the first time I'm trying this as an author.

After all, light novels with a cute girl on the cover typically sell like hotcakes. (Irrational, I know, but...) It's pretty exciting to try and compete in the light novel market with just guys on the cover. If Ruria Miyuki wasn't in charge of the art, I definitely would've chickened out and put girls on the cover.

Some might think that in terms of guys in this series, shouldn't Ted be the first one to make it onto the cover? But that guy shines best when he's in the background as a supporting character. At this point in time, I have no plans for him to be on the cover of any books in this series (LOL).

It feels weird to put him on a cover as if he's a main character. Something about it just doesn't feel right. It'd feel like I was forcing Ted to be in an awkward position just because of my own strange desires.

Anyway, getting back to the topic at hand, this was the much awaited past arc. The goal of these stories is to work up to where they defeat the demon king, save Lilith, and Abel is expelled from the Hero Party (the first scene of volume 1).

But there's a problem. I'm starting to think that it might be a little hard to write that many stories leading up to those events. In the first place, the past arc getting a follow-up volume depends a lot on how well it sells. But if it doesn't get its own stand-alone series, I'll do my best to appropriately throw flashbacks into the main story every now and then. I'll be looking at how things go and playing it by ear.

Response to Fan Mail

I've received a lot of letters from "Mr. N" from Ibaraki prefecture. Thank you so much! Judging by your reactions, my guess is that you're actually a woman. I'd never been too aware of it, but it seems that this series has women readers. My guess would be around twenty percent of all readers are women. I knew they existed from the statistics, but I haven't actually met any. Women readers are almost like a folk tale to authors.

Promotion Time

Surprise! The past arc will be receiving an official manga release, separate from the main story's manga serialization! So now there will be a pre-reincarnation and a post-reincarnation manga running at the same time. I think this kind of setup is pretty rare in the industry, so it'll be interesting to see how this turns out. Helming the series will be Hinata Yaya.

When the idea for a past arc manga series got green-lit, I begged my editor over and over for Hinata Yaya to be the artist, so I'm really happy that my wish

was granted. This will be the third series that I'm working with Hinata Yaya on. The reason I've been able to work with them three times is because each time I persistently asked for them (LOL).

A picture is worth a thousand words. I'm sure you'll understand when you see the final product, but Hinata Yaya is of the highest class and has some of the most powerful drawings in the industry of making manga versions of light novels. I'm just so excited to be able to work with Yaya!

Well then, I look forward to seeing you all in the next volume!

- Yusura Kankitsu

Yusura Kankitsu

Illustrator
Ruria Miyuki

vol. **4.5**

Reincarnated Mage *with Inferior* Eyes

Breezing through the Future as an Oppressed Ex-Hero



Ayane

An Obsidian Eye mage who's part of the magecraft organization, Chaos Raid.

Daytona

The daughter of the president of the royal capital's merchant's association. She met Abel in a tome store. She later becomes the Hero of Water.

Maria

For a time, she lived with Abel at an orphanage. She later becomes the Hero of Fire.

Cain

He met Abel in Arosa, the Town of the Reanimated Dead. He later becomes the Hero of Ash.

Abel

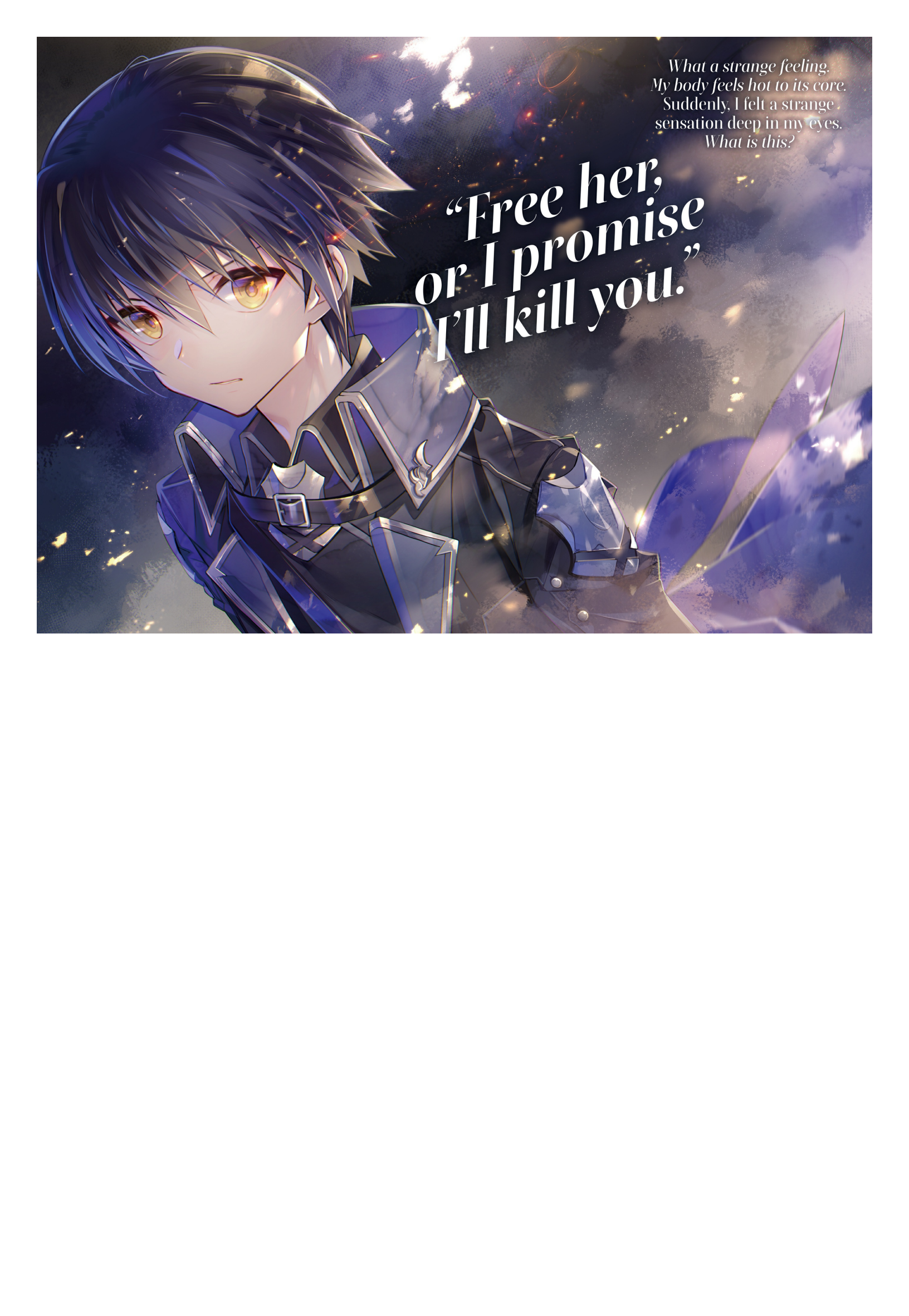
A genius mage with **Amber Eyes**—the strongest you can have. He was orphaned at a young age after being abandoned by his mother.



It was raining fish.
All that was left was
to pick out the most
expensive fish and
return the rest to the
ocean. If I could keep
this up, I'd have a
very efficient method
of catching fish on
my hands.

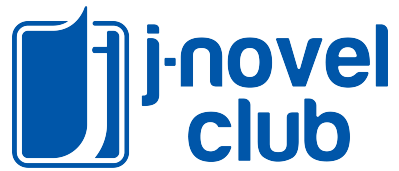
“Wh-What
is this?!”

“Wow!
This is
seriously
amazing, Abel!
How'd you do
that?!”

An anime-style illustration of a young man with dark blue, spiky hair and bright yellow eyes. He is wearing a dark blue, high-collared coat with silver-colored armor pieces on the shoulders and chest. He has a serious expression. The background is a dark, smoky space filled with glowing orange and yellow sparks or embers. In the upper right corner, there is a small, glowing blue and white object that looks like a crystal or a piece of machinery.

*What a strange feeling.
My body feels hot to its core.
Suddenly, I felt a strange
sensation deep in my eyes.
What is this?*

***“Free her,
or I promise
I’ll kill you.”***



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Reincarnated Mage with Inferior Eyes: Breezing through the Future as an Oppressed Ex-Hero Volume 4.5

by Yusura Kankitsu

Translated by Geirrlon Dunn Edited by Momo

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Illustrations by Ruria Miyuki

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